RUTHLESS
PARK AVENUE KINGS
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS
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RUTHLESS

PARK AVENUE KINGS

BOOK FIVE

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Cover Design: Hang Le
Cover Photo: Ren Saliba
Edited by Arran McNicol

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Thank You
Special Thanks
Also by Brooke Blaine
Also by Ella Frank
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SYNOPSIS

They called him America's golden son.
Now he's the man who'd burn the world for a prince.

When Prince Theodore Rinaldi vanishes, Shepard "Shep" Winchester III will do anything to bring him back.
What starts as a mission of duty ignites into a forbidden obsession—one that blurs every line between loyalty and love.

Back in New York, the Kings are under attack, their secrets exposed, their brotherhood fractured.
And when an attempt on Theo's life plays out in front of flashing cameras, the world sees what they were never meant to: a touch too intimate, a look too raw.

Shep is the son of American power.
Theo is European royalty.
And in a world built on loyalty, betrayal, and lies, love might be the most *ruthless* act of all.

Ruthless (Park Avenue Kings #5) is the second book in a duet within the Park Avenue Kings series.***Merciless (Park Avenue Kings #4)*** is the first and should be read before ***Ruthless***.

Books 1-3 can be read as standalone novels.

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1

SHEP

HOURS HAD PASSED. Fucking hours. And still no sign of Theo.

"Shep, we need to get back to the house." King's voice was merely background noise I chose to ignore as I trudged on through the mud deeper into the rainforest. Brazil was hot and humid at the best of times, but after the brief downpour an hour ago it was downright unbearable. With every step I took, my boots threatened to find a permanent place in the sludge and my eyes burned from the sweat pouring down my face. We'd already come across more poisonous reptiles than I'd ever seen in my life, something that would've sent Theo running out of the jungle.

Fuck, I was *hoping* he'd come running out. Any second now I expected to see him, pissed off from the inconvenience of someone with a death wish thinking they could grab him and go. That they'd underestimated what he could do with his bare hands and that they'd had it coming when he fed them to a nearby anaconda. Then he'd grumble about having to see a damn anaconda and that I should bust out mine to rid him of the terrible nightmare.

I almost smiled at the thought, until a rough hand grabbed me by the arm, jerking me to a stop. King's serious face flooded my vision, his strong body blocking my next step.

"He's not here." Those three words felt like a slap in the face, and I growled and shoved him out of my way. Not an easy feat under normal circumstances, but with the way I was feeling, it wasn't smart to fuck with me.

King should know better.

“I know you don’t want to believe it, but he’s gone. The sooner we get back to the house and figure out our next steps, the sooner we get him back.”

When I continued to ignore him, King again blocked my path, but this time he was prepared for me to fight back. I swung on him and he ducked out of the way, but then maneuvered himself so he was behind me and my arm was pinned to my back between us.

“Shep.” He gentled his voice and I squeezed my eyes shut, wishing I could block him out. There was no time for this. Theo was out here somewhere, possibly hurt, maybe even…

No. I wasn’t going to think about that. He was fine. He was capable. I would find him. And then I would make the motherfucker that took him pay.

“We’re going to get him back,” King said, his arms wrapped around me like steel. “But let’s be smart about this.”

“We’re wasting time—”

“You’re going to get yourself killed out here before you find him.” He shifted me to face where a snake as thick as my waist slithered across the path not five feet from us. An involuntary shudder racked my body, but if it meant getting Theo back, I would’ve strangled that fucker in a heartbeat and without hesitation.

“Let me go.”

“I’ll let you go when you start—”

Before he could finish talking, I brought my booted foot up and slammed my heel back into his shin. A loud curse rent the air and he immediately loosened his grip on me.

I spun on him and took immediate advantage of his surprise by ramming my shoulder into his torso. King’s breath left him on a whoosh as I hurled all two hundred and twenty pounds of tightly wound muscle into him.

“Shep,” he gritted out as I slammed him into one of the massive trees surrounding us, and just about the time he realized I was done listening, I’d drawn my arm back and balled my fist.

I swung first and thought about a second too late, as he dodged the blow and my hand met with the solid trunk of the tree. As my own curse echoed around us, King shoved forward, pushing me off him.

“Get a fucking hold of yourself,” he barked, as pain shot through my hand and up my arm. “What good are you going to be to Theo if you break your damn hand?”

“About as good as I would be if I tuck tail and run back to the compound.”

“It’s not tucking tail.” King’s chest heaved as he braced himself for whatever I might do next. “It’s called using your head.”

“Fuck my head. Theo is out there—”

“Without his tracker, without any weapons, without any way to communicate with us—”

“You think I don’t know that?” I shouted so loud the animals in the trees around us kicked up a fuss.

“Then start acting like it. Your running off half-cocked, hellbent on revenge, isn’t going to do Theo any good in the long run.”

I scoffed, narrowing my eyes dangerously. “Something I’m sure you care a whole lot about.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?”

I closed the few steps between us until I was toe to toe with the man I’d once thought was my forever, and all I could think about now was how I would have no problem laying him out flat to get to the one man who was now my everything.

“This is your fault,” I said in a voice I barely recognized but felt in my very soul.

“My fault?”

“Yes,” I hissed, baring my teeth. “If you hadn’t come to check up on us, we wouldn’t be in this fucking mess. If you hadn’t been your usual controlling self, Theo wouldn’t have been taken and I wouldn’t be out here wondering if he was dead or alive.”

I reached for King’s shirt and twisted it in my hand, hauling him in so close his eyes flared. “So if you want to talk about people who don’t use their heads, how about you take a fucking look at yourself?”

I shoved him away from me so hard he stumbled. His expression morphed from anger to shock then…acceptance.

“You’re right.” His jaw twitched as he cracked his neck from side to side. “But we don’t have time to play the blame game. With his tracker cut out and left at the house, we have nothing to go on.”

“Then how about you fuck off and let me do this my way?”

I turned, about to head deeper into the jungle, when King said, “Because I won’t be responsible for losing two of you.”

I rounded back so fast on him we almost collided. “He’s not lost. He was fucking *taken*, and I’m going to get him back.” I jabbed a finger between us. “You can do whatever the fuck you like.”

Fucking King. Always thinking he knew what’s best. *Yeah, how’d that turn out this time?*

“I think I should go back to the house.”

“Then go.”

“Shep, there’s no way they’ve stayed here. It’s been hours. If they were close by, we would’ve found them.”

“Then maybe they’re not fucking close.” I refused to believe I couldn’t get to Theo, couldn’t find him. I’d feel it if he was gone, right? I’d somehow know if he was de—

No, I wasn’t going to let myself think about that. These fuckers were hiding somewhere, lying low until nightfall so they could make their escape. I had at least an hour or two left until then. Surely I could find some sign. I was a good tracker. A hiker. I could find him.

“Then maybe I should go back to the house,” King said. “You have a radio, weapons, your tracker. I can connect with New York and—”

“They can do absolutely nothing.” I glanced over my shoulder to where King was eyeing me like I was a wild animal, which wasn’t far from the truth. “Go,” I said, dismissing him in a way no one would ever dare to. “I’d actually prefer it.”

I started off toward the thick vines, machete in hand in case that snake decided to make a second appearance—the reptile *or* the motherfucker who’d dared to touch my man.

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2

THEO

WELL.

I'M FUCKED.

And not the way I preferred to be fucked, either.

My head throbbed like I'd been hit with a crowbar—

Oh wait. I had.

Not exactly the outcome I'd expected when I stepped outside to light a kretek and give Shep and King some space to hash out their shit.

Pain lanced through my temple and I instinctively went to reach for it, but a shooting flash of fire ricocheted up my arms and had me biting the inside of my cheek to keep quiet. My wrists were bound tightly behind me, and I was sitting on the cold ground, up against something hard. I didn't dare open my eyes, though, not when I needed to assess the situation first. Hell, I didn't even know if they were working, not with the amount of pain shooting across my eyes, which only pissed me off more.

Who the fuck thought it was a good idea to come after me? To leave me alive?

That was a fatal mistake on their part. *Ce putain d'abruti est suicidaire.*

How long was I unconscious? Where was I now? And who the hell was the asshole or assholes I'd have to kill?

My hands balled into fists behind me. Whatever I'd been pushed up against was cool to the touch and scraped against my skin when I tested out my restraints. A boulder? A rock wall? I was obviously outside somewhere;

I could feel the humidity in the air and the sweat dripping down the back of my neck.

Wait… Was I still in Brazil? In the goddamn jungle?

I was hotheaded at the best of times, and the urge to open my eyes, rip myself free, and go apeshit was immediately what I prepared myself to do, the pain in my body be damned.

But like I could hear him beside me, Shep's logic took over, urging me to be smart about this.

Putain…Shep. I could see his stunning face behind my eyes, and the way it made my heart clench only intensified my rage at being kidnapped.

What would he say if he were here? *Breathe. Get a good sense of your surroundings before making a move. Get back to me safely.*

That last thought had me swallowing hard and wondering if he'd even want me back after the showdown with King. Shep hadn't exactly defended me or been willing to tell him we were more than just the fuck he'd walked in on. I wasn't about to admit that bothered me, so before I said something stupid I'd regret, I figured I'd calm down with a smoke.

Look where that's gotten me.

Keeping my eyes closed, I steadied my breathing and listened for anything that would give me clues.

The hoot of monkeys somewhere off in the distance…

Insects buzzing around nearby…

A deep male voice speaking in hushed tones a few feet away…

I couldn't feel the presence of anyone beside me, and that was enough to have me cracking my lids open slowly.

Putain. I *was* still in Brazil. Still in the damn jungle in some kind of cave. The crunch of booted feet on branches alerted me to the man in black pacing in front of the entrance. He was turned away, so I couldn't see his face, but I gathered he wasn't overly tall, though he had a muscular build that said he was the type to start and end a fight.

He held a phone up to his ear, and I didn't make a sound as I strained to hear what he was saying.

"He's secure." He paused to listen to whoever was on the other end. "No, he's still breathing…I think."

Nice to know you care, asshole. But this little conversation he was having gave me the exact piece of information I'd been after. Whoever this fuckwad was, he clearly wasn't the brains behind the operation. *Non*, that

title belonged to whoever was on the other end of that call, and after I eradicated this muscled meathead, I would hunt that cretin down and end his miserable life.

"Led me right to him, dumb fucker."

If he was talking about King, I couldn't actually disagree with him, because seriously, what the fuck had he been thinking? Oh, that's right, he hadn't been. He'd been acting on arrogance and adrenaline, two things that usually worked out well for him. But not this time. This time when King had fueled up his jet and floored it out to our *hidden* compound to chew our asses out, he hadn't even thought to check his rearview mirror, had he? *Non*, and what had he done? He'd brought this dickhead right to our front door.

And why?

Because we hadn't checked in with him in a day.

At least, that was the story he'd tried to tell. But the truth of the matter was, he'd done all those stupid, moronic things because Shep—his ex-boyfriend and the incredible man he'd let slip through his fingers—had been holed up with me in what some might consider a jungle paradise. And *that* had driven him fucking crazy.

Not that King would ever admit it. Or that Shep would ever believe it.

Dieu, could there be two more obtuse people? It really was amazing they ran our organization when they couldn't even see what was as plain as the noses on both of their too-good-looking faces.

They had unfinished business. It wasn't that they were still in love or pining after each other. But they had underlying shit there to clean up, and I was now paying for it.

Putain. I was going to kick both their asses when I got free, because I *would* get free. It was just a matter of when and how.

"We'll be leaving in the morning. Before sunrise," Fuckwad said, as he began pacing again. "Plane knows to be ready."

He listened to whatever was being said on the other end, then grunted an affirmative.

"He's not going to be a problem. He's out cold." *That's what you think.* "I'll call when we touch down. Let you know we're on our way."

Another pause, and then, "That's not where you told me. Yeah, yeah, okay, so Mott. Got it."

Mott? What the…?

I filed the information away, knowing the second I got out of here I'd be searching for every fucking reference of Mott that existed. Because whoever was behind this, behind the emails, the threats, the attempt on my life not once but *twice* now, I was determined to track them down.

"My eyes are on him," Fuckwad said, and as he started back in my direction, I hung my head and played the unconscious man he seemed to think I was. "He's not going anywhere."

That was what *he* thought. But it was obvious that whoever was on the other end of the phone was more aware of my reputation, because they seemed awfully concerned with knowing that I was secure and knocked the fuck out.

Would've been smarter to tranquilize me.

"I'll call tomorrow," he finally said as two boots stopped in front of me.

I had a quick fantasy about removing the laces and strangling him with them, and, God willing, I'd get to fulfill it. But for now, as the very stupid man crouched down in front of me, I shut my eyes and played rag doll.

He reached out and angled my face up to his, and it took everything I had not to surprise the dumb shit by lunging forward and biting a chunk out of his ugly face. But I was smarter than that, and after the last month with Shep I'd learned a modicum of control.

I was going to wait this motherfucker out and gain as much strength as possible.

He obviously had orders to keep me alive, and while that worked for me, it definitely wasn't going to work for him.

Oh well, that wasn't my problem.

But I was definitely his.

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3

SHEP

RAGE FUELED ME as dusk fell.

The coming darkness would make my surroundings harder to see, and while I carried a powerfully lit flashlight that at least ensured the path I trekked through was clear, it was shit compared to what I needed.

I carefully scanned every goddamn inch I could see, hoping for anything that would give me a clue to Theo's whereabouts. King was dead wrong that he wasn't here somewhere. I could feel it. I could feel *him*. If he was off this damn continent, I would know.

Ducking under a low-hanging branch, I readjusted my grip on the handle of the machete I carried and pressed on, feeling the urgency of time slipping through my fingers. King had given me the rest of the weapons he'd been carrying, so I was loaded up on knives, guns, and an assortment of other munitions, though with the way I felt, I wouldn't need anything more than my bare hands.

Theo better be fucking breathing when I find him…

The alternative literally took my breath away when it flashed, unwanted, through my mind. But the second I saw his tracker, covered in blood on the jungle floor feet from the safe house, I'd known this was a race against time. The fact they'd known he had it, where it was located, and how to remove it sent a searing pain through my chest as I thought about all the what-ifs, each one more morbid than the last. And on top of it all was the heavy guilt, knowing that the last time I saw him I'd been more caught up in King's surprise arrival than Theo's feelings. I kept replaying

the conversation over and over again in my head as we'd been scrambling to put our clothes back on. I'd been shocked as shit to see my ex standing at the foot of the bed in what should've been a private moment between Theo and me. I hadn't been thinking straight, and Theo being Theo, he'd had nothing but questions.

"Now's not really the time, Theo," I'd said.

"Because King walked in? So the fuck what? He was going to find out sooner or later."

I sighed in agitation and ran a hand over my face, but when I didn't say anything in response, Theo's irritation began to rise.

"You were *going to tell him about us, right? That was what we'd decided."*

"We don't have time to talk about this right now." I started toward the door—heading out to where King was impatiently waiting—but before I could leave, Theo grabbed my arm, halting me.

"Answer me," he demanded.

He hadn't been asking for much. He'd wanted a confirmation from me about us, and what had I said?

"Not now, Theo."

And then I'd pulled away from him and left the room. All while Theo glared after me like he wished he could throw something at my head.

He probably should've. I'd acted like a jackass, and now that was the last memory I had of the two of us alone together.

Why hadn't I just given him that reassurance? That I wanted him and I didn't give a shit if King or anyone knew? Why did I even waste time caring what King's reaction would be when he found out and then worrying when he actually did?

It was fucked. *I* was fucked. I'd never expected to actually fall for Theo. It had happened so naturally I hadn't even realized until it was too late. Until I woke up to him sleeping beside me and realized there were deeper feelings happening than just a fun hookup.

You're such a goddamn idiot.

I was so caught up in berating myself as I trekked deeper into the jungle that I almost missed it—the half of a booted footprint that disappeared into

scattered leaves and vines.

A curse escaped me as I knelt down for a closer view, shining the flashlight in the direction the print was headed.

“I knew it,” I murmured, hope rising in my chest. “You’re fucking here somewhere. I’ll find you.”

And when I do, I’ll never let you go.

I straightened and started forward, moving a little to the side to keep an eye on what direction the prints veered off in—not an easy task now that darkness had officially taken over.

Something swooped low at my head and I instinctively swung the machete in its direction, but the bat had already flown off. I could only imagine Theo’s reaction if he’d been here.

The thought made me smile for a second, a welcome feeling in amongst the dread and desperation that had been guiding me so far. But knowing they’d definitely come this way made the tiniest spark of hope ignite.

Hope that I would find him, and pleasure at the idea of ending the life that had dared take him from me.

That thought had my smile turning to a scowl as I started up again, my muscles protesting against the strain of having trekked all day through rough terrain, but I wasn’t about to stop now.

I slashed my way forward through the vines, cursing when one fought back by smacking my cheek and slicing open a sliver of skin. A howl rent the air from above and sounded suspiciously like laughter as I pressed my fingers to the wound.

Well, at least I was amusing *something* out here in this damn jungle. It served me right for laughing at Theo when he complained about spiders and leeches. If he were here right now he’d no doubt be mouthing off about how karma was a bitch and she was slapping me right in the face, and really I couldn’t blame him.

I did have some karma coming my way, but could it happen *after* I had Theo home and in one piece?

I rinsed off my cheek with some water and then started up again, following the boot marks on the ground. One set was clear and decisive, the second like someone had been dragged. The mud at times formed a somewhat legible impression, only to then smear along the ground in a line, as though the person’s feet had given out from under them—and *that* thought made my blood fucking boil.

It’d be one thing to know Theo was conscious and able to do bodily harm. But these prints made that glimmer of hope I’d been feeling snuff out like the flame of a dying candle.

Fucking hell. I needed to find him, and I needed to find him now.

I marched on, my senses on high alert as the sounds of the jungle became the soundtrack of my living nightmare. The rustling in the trees, humming from the insects, and slithering of God knew what pushed me to move faster, to forge on, and when my light caught on something shiny on some leaves up ahead, my breath caught in the back of my throat.

I hurried forward, my stomach dropping as the slick red liquid coating the leaves became visible.

Blood. That was fucking blood. And a whole lot of it.

My vision started to spot as every worst-case scenario I’d imagined flashed before my eyes. Up until now, I’d been doing pretty good at squashing those persistent fuckers. But seeing this? Coming face to face with what could very well be Theo’s final moments made my stomach lurch. I grabbed hold of it, turning off the path in case my breakfast wanted to make a reappearance, but apparently it was smart enough to stay in place.

I took in a deep breath and closed my eyes, telling myself this could mean anything. This might not even be Theo’s blood. It might be the dumb fucker who’d tried his hand at besting my guy.

Yeah, that seemed more accurate…unless Theo was out cold.

I straightened and took another look at the blood and spatter, then all around to make sure I wasn’t missing anything. When I could finally move my legs again without feeling like I’d pass out, I aimed my light up ahead.

It was then I saw it, the distinct pattern of clear boots and ones that had been dragged, and that got me moving again.

If they’d killed Theo, why would they continue to cart around dead weight? They wouldn’t, and that meant only one thing—Theo was alive.

Something that wouldn’t be true for his captor when I finally got my hands on him.

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4

THEO

DESPITE MY CURRENT hellscape, I was surprised to find myself relatively…calm. Waiting. Biding my time for the right moment to get the fuck out of here.

Shep would be so proud.

He also would've known better than to use handcuffs on me if he didn't want me to escape. Really, cuffs were child's play, and I was almost insulted that the hired hand didn't think I needed some heavy-duty rope work.

Not a very smart guy, this one.

He was also a noisy eater, and whatever he'd unwrapped and was currently shoving down his throat was enough to cover any sound I made as I carefully slid out of the handcuffs. I was still pretending to be knocked out with my head hanging down, eyes slammed shut, though every now and again I'd crack one open to get a sense of where he was and what he was doing.

I set the handcuffs on the ground between my ass and the rock wall, and the relief was instant. They'd been too tight, and straining against them meant the wetness I felt there was probably blood.

Just add that to the list, then, since I could feel the warm trickle from my head wound as it dripped down the side of my face.

I was the picture of royalty, wasn't I? The world knew I was rebellious, but they had no idea getting taken in the jungle was just another Tuesday night.

The sound of several somethings squeaking echoed in the shallow cave, and then I felt a rush of air over my head and heard a string of curses from the merc.

“Goddamn bats,” he said, and I made the mistake of peeking to see him jumping to his feet and swinging on the flying bloodsuckers.

I should’ve just kept my eyes shut, because now it was next to impossible to sit here and not run for my life.

Really, the priorities, Theo, I thought. Fear of death by merc? Nonexistent. Fear of bats? Ready to burn the world down to get the hell away.

A shudder ran through me as the merc continued to swat at them. His attention was off me now, and I took advantage by opening my eyes and scanning for a weapon or anything I could use.

Putain, really? The idiot was swinging at the bats with his crowbar, which meant that was off the table for me to grab. He had a couple of guns strapped to the sides of his pants, but I didn’t know if I could get close enough to steal one of those.

What else, what else…

I quickly scanned the cave floor, which was nothing but packed-down dirt. There were a few small rocks scattered about, but nothing significant enough to cause the damage I wanted to. Blood flow was just now coming back into my hands after being practically cut off for however long I’d been taken, and I wasn’t sure I would be able to use them to full capacity. At least, not in the next thirty seconds.

I wiggled my toes and shifted my legs a little, making sure they were in working order. Other than feeling a bit numb—which hopefully wouldn’t fuck me when I stood up—they seemed okay.

“Yeah, and stay out, you fuckers,” the merc grumbled as the last of the bats flew out of the cave. I quickly grabbed the few small rocks within my reach—pathetic, but with good aim it could buy me a few seconds. Since my body obviously wasn’t in great working condition, I didn’t know if I could overpower this asshole the way I usually could. My head was throbbing so bad my vision was starting to blur a little around the edges. Maybe that was from blood loss. Either way, it wasn’t good, and though I was a reckless fool most of the time, I wasn’t about to die in the middle of the jungle. I tried to keep hold of the rage I felt, but even that was slipping through my fingers.

All I could focus on now was getting away. Getting myself free and back to Shep. That was the plan, and I *would* make it happen.

"Still sleeping, Your Highness?" the merc said, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he turned his attention back to where I was "knocked out" again. I could hear his footsteps as he moved closer, could feel his presence looming over me like a shadow. "I heard you were more of a fighter, but you're just a pussy like the rest of them, aren't you?"

It was all I could do to keep my body still, especially when he kicked my foot.

I want to tear out your heart with my bare hands and make you eat it.

Then the idiot did exactly as I hoped—he crouched down in front of me.

I took my shot then, swinging my arm around and smashing the motherfucker square in the jaw with the rock I held. A howl of pain ripped from his mouth as he careened to the side, and I shoved up from the ground with every ounce of energy I could muster.

Once on my feet, I turned and landed a hard kick to my captor's stomach, then one to his head. He groaned and spat blood onto the ground, but when he started to stand, I knew I needed to get out of there. He had more muscle than me and more fuel in the tank, and if a rock to the face and a boot to his temple hadn't slowed him, nothing would.

That was when I did the one thing I loathed more than being on my best behavior—I ran away from a fight.

Merde. There was nothing I hated more than being weak, but I was also smart enough to know when I was at a disadvantage.

I hightailed it out of the cave and straight into the one place I promised myself I would never, *ever* visit again if I survived this horror show—the jungle.

I shuddered at the thought, trying not to think about the fact I was leaving behind one nightmare for another kind altogether. God only knew what I was running into, and with blood all over me as well.

My head was throbbing like a bitch, and so was my arm for that matter, as I bolted toward the thick, tangled vines up ahead. But now wasn't the time to think about that. I didn't have the safety net of weapons or even sight, as I ran headfirst into the black void that seemed my only option.

The debris crunched under my feet as I pushed through the thick leaves and branches, trying my hardest not to imagine all of the creepy-crawlies

that came out at night. There were bats and, I knew firsthand, leeches, and Shep had mentioned monkeys and…fuck, jaguars.

Had he been serious? I wasn't sure. But with blood plastered all over my face and who knew where else, I was sure I was as inviting to them right now as a royal banquet dinner would be to me.

Don't think about it. Don't think about it.

The last thing I needed to do was worry about all the things that might want to kill me *in* the jungle as I ran from the asshole who would no doubt kill me once he took me *out* of the jungle.

Why was this happening? I still had no idea. But for some reason I'd been put on some sort of hit list. A hit list put together by the man on the phone. That was who was behind this. The man who'd made last-minute changes to the plan.

Mott…

"That's not where you told me. Yeah, yeah, okay, so Mott. Got it."

I kept that on repeat as the only piece of actual information that was useful. It meant something, it had to, and I'd be damned if I died before working out what.

That thought gave me the extra boost of adrenaline I needed to keep going, but as I veered off to the right, my foot snagged on a vine and I pitched forward. I landed with a resounding thud and cursed as pain splintered through what felt like my entire body.

It ricocheted up my arm, and that was when I realized there was a whole lot more going on there than just the cuts from the handcuffs. I rolled to my back and pulled up my sleeve, and saw the deep cut up my arm. I'd been so preoccupied by my fucked-up situation that I hadn't noticed it before. My capture and the marching band inside my head had taken precedence over everything else.

But as I pulled up my sleeve and got a good look at the mess on my arm, I knew exactly what that fuckwad had done—he'd cut out my tracker.

Putain. Now I was really fucked. I'd thought by getting away and heading out here to the jungle, Shep would at least be able to track me. But as I stared at the jagged scar up my forearm, a red haze of fury clouded my vision.

It was one thing for *me* to remove my tracker, but a whole other kind of violation that this piece of shit had done it. That he'd even *known* to do it

was also a new piece of information I filed away. One that pissed me off with every second I lay there on the ground.

Get up, I told myself as I stared up at the canopy above. *Get up, get moving, and get the fuck out of here.* But as I moved to sit up, the jungle started to spin.

I clutched at my head, willing it to slow, as I struggled to get back on my feet and stay upright. The lack of food and loss of blood now overpowered the initial surge of adrenaline that had fueled me.

I blinked, trying to get some sort of idea of where to go next, what direction to head in, but it was no use. Every choice looked as formidable as the next. A black void of nothingness, filled with predators of all kinds. Usually I'd be excited by that idea; I would revel in the hunt. But the odds were against me, and that meant I needed to come up with a better plan, because my body wasn't going to let me run much farther.

The sound of a gun cocking behind me had me going dead still.

"They said you weren't the smartest of your little group," the merc said, his voice a little slurred before he spat on the ground beside me. "They were right about that."

I didn't hesitate, swinging my arm around to knock the gun from his grip and sending it flying. He must've pulled the trigger as it left his hand, though, because the sound of a gunshot echoed through the night air, sending up a flurry of birds or bats or whatever the fuck up out of the trees. I didn't wait around to see if I'd gotten hit before turning and slamming into his torso, knocking him back a few feet as I took him by surprise.

Merde, even with my adrenaline pumping, it was harder than it should be to tackle him. Normally he'd be on the ground already and I'd be making that ugly mug my punching bag.

But he stayed on his feet, which instantly put me at a disadvantage when he didn't go down. He tried to wrap his arms around me, but I dug my boots into the mud, hoping that would make it impossible for him to lift me.

Balling my fist, I reached back with all my strength and pounded into his side, one after another, unrelenting. He groaned with each hit, trying to push me off him, but I was like a dog with a bone. I wasn't stopping. He could've just let me go, but now it was going to come down to one of us leaving this place alive. I didn't like my odds, but I'd never go down without giving him every piece of rage I had inside me.

If I could get my hands on the other gun he had strapped to him, I had a chance. I didn't know where the hell the one that went flying went, and I didn't have time to look, so with every strike of my fist into him I lowered my hold on him with my other arm, feeling around for the gun.

Or a knife. Anything, really, to give me an advantage.

But suddenly my head flew back as the merc's knee connected with my chin so hard I swore I could feel my brain rattling in my head. I fully expected to hit the ground, but when I didn't, I realized it was only because he gripped my shirt tight in his fist, holding me off balance.

He sneered down at me with pure loathing, and then his fist connected with my jaw so hard I *did* hit the ground.

I couldn't think. I couldn't see. All I felt was pain, and it wasn't just physical. Because if I stayed down, I'd never see Shep again, and that was more devastating than the realization that my body was failing me right now.

Putain—Shep. He'd blame himself. Even though none of this was his fault.

I just wished we hadn't wasted time fighting our feelings instead of acting on them. We hadn't gotten enough time.

"I was supposed to bring you in alive," the merc said, standing over me now—with the gun I'd been searching for pointed down at me. "But you've pissed me off now."

Well, that was something we had in common.

He held on to his side with one hand, like I'd done some damage there, and motioned with the gun for me to move.

"On your knees, *Your Highness*."

"Fuck you, you ugly bastard."

His swift kick to my ribs had me wincing, but I wasn't about to give him the satisfaction of killing me the way he wanted.

He reached forward, gripped my shirt again, and hauled me to my knees. As he pressed the muzzle of the gun to my forehead, I could see blood staining his teeth and dripping down the side of his mouth from the hit I'd gotten on him.

Good. Maybe Shep and King would find him and finish off the job.

"I'll send my regards to the palace," he said, giving me a sinister smile.

His face wasn't the last thing I wanted to see, though. So I closed my eyes, bringing Shep's handsome face to my mind. He and my brothers, my

fellow Kings, would avenge me. Everyone would pay.

I braced myself and, seconds later, heard the gunshot.

But I felt no pain. Maybe I was already dead?

Then the heavy weight of the man who'd shot me fell down on top of me.

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5

SHEP

I HELD MY gun steady as the fucker with a death wish fell forward, the fatal shot hitting its mark between his brows. He never even knew I was there. Didn't have a clue that something more dangerous lurked in the shadows as he kicked and threatened Theo.

I hadn't wanted to shoot him. That was too easy, too painless compared to the suffering I wanted to inflict on him before I killed him. I'd wanted to tear him apart and torture him slowly, giving him back tenfold the damage I saw he'd done to Theo.

But then he pointed his gun at my man and I no longer had the advantage of time. I had seconds, and I didn't waste them. Not when I had a clear shot at the motherfucker's head.

I didn't think. Didn't hesitate. I pulled the trigger, ending his worthless life.

He crumpled instantly, pitching forward and falling down—on top of Theo. For whatever reason, Theo didn't move out of the way and took his weight, both of them hitting the ground with Theo flat on his back.

"Theo!" I called out, running toward the tangled heap of human limbs. As I skidded to a stop, ready to pull the asshole off my guy, he was shoved off with a heave and Theo's face came into view.

I fell to my knees beside him, my breathing coming in rapid pants as I scanned every inch of his dirt- and blood-covered face. Then the sexy fucker's lips curved and his teeth gleamed up at me.

“Damn, Shep.” Theo coughed. “I would’ve taken a dozen roses as a declaration of your feelings.”

“I’ll give you anything you want,” I told him, taking his hand and helping him to sit. But that was still too far away, so I pulled him into my arms, needing him more than my next breath.

“Anything?” he managed, then a gurgled chuckle left him followed by another coughing fit.

I relaxed my hold and brought my flashlight up, shining it over him. There was an angry wound upside his head, several bruises to his face that I could see, and God knew what else beneath his clothes.

“Is there anyone else?”

“No.”

“Where do you hurt?”

“Everywhere?”

I cut my eyes to the lifeless body behind him, and once again I regretted how easily he’d gotten off.

“He deserved a more painful end than that,” Theo said, mirroring my thoughts as he glanced over his shoulder.

“He would’ve gotten it too. If it’d been up to me, he’d be writhing in pain for what he did to you—but I didn’t have a choice. Not when your life was at stake.”

“Aww.” Theo’s eyes came back to find mine, a spark of mischief glinting in them. “That might be the most romantic thing you’ve ever said to me, Shep.”

I shook my head, reaching out to run my fingers down his blood-smeared cheek. “How can you be joking at a time like this?”

“I don’t know.” He turned his head to kiss the palm of my hand. “Probably because I never thought I’d *get* another time like this?”

Jesus. The idea that he’d resigned himself to death made a shooting pain stab through my heart.

I couldn’t imagine a world without Theo in it. Couldn’t imagine *my* world without him. The idea that I’d almost lost him before I could tell him any of that made my stomach twist around on itself until it was tied into a knot.

“Hey?” Theo reached for my face and ran a thumb over my tight lips. “I’m still here, still alive, and that’s thanks to you.”

I blinked several times, trying to banish the visual of Theo on his knees with a gun to his head. But no matter how hard I tried, it kept playing on a loop.

“I should’ve gotten to you quicker.”

“I’m just glad you got to me when you did. Those cave accommodations were subpar.”

“But if I’d been here sooner—”

“I never would’ve learned some new information.”

That stopped me in my tracks. “New information?”

“Mhmm. And if you’d come in all guns blazing and killing him dead, that never would’ve happened.”

“Are you seriously scolding me about saving your life?”

“No… I’m very appreciative of that fact, *but* it would be remiss of me if I didn’t point out that it’s hard to question a dead person. Isn’t that what you told me back in Cardiff? So it was good you showed up after I got some intel. It’s obvious nothing was going to stop you from playing my hero.”

He was out of his damn mind. Whatever he’d been hit with must’ve knocked a few brain cells loose from his head, because if I hadn’t done what I’d done when I showed up then he would be—

Theo grinned at me.

You cunning, knowing shit.

He’d just said all that on purpose. He was trying to get me out of my head, past my guilt and worry from earlier, and damn if it hadn’t worked.

“Think you’re pretty smart, don’t you?”

“*Non.*” Theo shrugged. “I just know you, and I know exactly what you’re thinking. But if you don’t mind, could we please get the fuck out of this jungle?”

I got to my feet and reached for his hand, gently cupping his elbow as I helped him to stand. “That we can do.”

I aimed my flashlight in the direction I’d come, showing the cleared path I’d carved out of the vines. It was a difficult trek during the day, but in the starless night under the dense canopy of leaves with Theo’s injuries, it was going to be quite the trip back.

“Do you need me to find something for you to lean on? A branch, maybe?”

“I’m fine. Any damage he did was from the waist up.”

I grunted at that, not wanting to think about what I'd find when I got Theo back to the safe house and checked him for injuries. But right now I just needed to get him there. With the amount of blood he'd lost and lack of food and water, it was a miracle he could stand on his own two feet.

Which reminded me…

"Here." I dug into my pants pocket and pulled out a protein bar and a bottle of water. "Get some food and water in you, while I check on him."

Theo took the offered bar and tore open the packet with his teeth. "Pretty sure he's dead, Shep."

No shit. That fucker had gone down like a sack of potatoes. I hadn't aimed to miss. "For weapons, phones, maybe a wallet?"

"Oh, right." Theo tapped the side of his head. "Brain's still a little slow. That happens when it makes contact with a solid object."

I winced, knowing his head must be throbbing like a son of a bitch. But the fact he wasn't passed out or unable to talk made me feel somewhat better.

I took a quick walk around the body, checking his pockets for anything that might be useful, but the only thing the asshole had on him was his gun. Not all that shocking, considering the line of work he was in. It wasn't like he was going to carry ID. But I had been hoping for a phone.

As it was, it looked like he'd been in too much of a rush taking off after Theo to grab it, if he'd had one on him.

"You mentioned something about a subpar cave," I said. "You wouldn't by chance remember where it is, would you?"

Theo snorted. "Sure, about two miles on the left there's a little sign that says: *You have to be fucking kidding.* It's pitch black out here, I have a head wound, and was running for my life. I wasn't thinking about anything other than getting back to *you*."

My heart skipped several beats as Theo looked down at me, the words he'd just said highlighted by the emotion swirling in his eyes. I got to my feet and moved over to where he stood, and as I approached, Theo swallowed.

"You were trying to get back to me?"

"With every single breath I took."

I cradled his cheeks and lowered my forehead to his, then shut my eyes and confessed, "I felt the exact same way. I knew you were out here, knew you were alive, and I wasn't going to stop until I had you back in my arms."

Theo took in a deep breath and let it out. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

I nodded and laced my fingers with his. “You got it.”

We headed off toward the path I’d carved out, but then Theo drew me to a stop, and I turned back to see a frown creasing his smeared brow.

“What is it? Are you hurting? Do you need a crutch after all? Should I carry you?”

“*Non*, *non*, nothing like that…” I could see the consternation etched into his weary features as he said, “King?”

Oh yeah, in the midst of all my anger, fear, and worry, I’d forgotten to mention him. Of course Theo would be wondering where our leader had disappeared to and what we might be walking back into when we got back home.

“He’s gone back to New York.”

“He… Wait, he fucking *left* me here?”

“Well…” I grimaced. “We kind of got into a fight and I told him to fuck off.”

Theo’s eyes widened, but I merely shrugged.

“I didn’t need his judgment, okay? This was his fault, so I told him to go.”

Theo took a step closer to me and angled his face up to mine, and every nightmarish thought I’d had of never seeing him again vanished in the face of the pride and admiration I saw staring back at me. “Shep?”

“Yes?”

“Take me home.”

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6

THEO

"DAMN. I SHOULD get kidnapped more often," I said, admiring the eyeful I got when Shep bent over the soaking tub off the primary bathroom. The man really did have a spectacular ass.

"Not funny." Those blue eyes met mine over his shoulder, looking far too serious and full of too much worry when I was standing upright and only a few feet away. He hadn't even given me a minute to sit down before carrying me off to get naked…though that was unfortunately more to do with his urgency in checking my wounds than wanting to worship my body.

"Oh come on, your ass is practically begging for attention and I'm not supposed to notice? You think a crowbar beat the urge out of me?"

Shep's shoulders went rigid, and the hand he had under the faucet to check the water's temperature dropped out of view.

"Crowbar," he said slowly, his voice dropping so low I almost missed it over the sound of the running water.

On second thought, maybe mentioning specifics wasn't the best idea, not when Shep looked ready to murder a man twice.

"Not something I would've chosen. 'Assailant in the jungle with a crowbar' doesn't have quite the ring that 'Miss Scarlet in the library with a candlestick' does." I tried for an easy smile to reassure him I wasn't completely fucked up—even though the jury was still out on that—but it was harder than it should be to move my face when it was throbbing like a motherfucker.

I'd avoided the mirror when we walked in, resting my weight on the counter instead, but now I was curious just how hideous I was. Would I need to make up a story about a freak accident for any permanent injuries the public would see?

Eh, I didn't give a shit about that. The only thing I cared about was if Shep would still look at me the way he had this morning.

The nerves as I braced myself for what I might see were ridiculous. I was alive, if barely. And wouldn't be standing here if it wasn't for Shep.

I took a deep breath, let it out, then opened my eyes.

Bordel…de merde.

The man looking back at me was a mess of blood and dirt, one side of my face completely swollen and bruised. No wonder Shep had been in a panic to get me back here.

I wished I could say I felt better than I looked, but every part of me ached in a way I'd never felt before. It wasn't often anyone got the better of me.

A long trail of drying blood ran from my forearm, where the asshole had somehow managed to find and cut out my tracker, and my wrists were raw and swollen from the handcuffs.

I looked back up at my face as Shep watched me silently from where he sat on the edge of the tub. Inspecting each cheek, I said, "I think I could still make *People* magazine's sexiest list. Guys love battle scars, *non*?"

Shep's eyes softened as they met mine in the mirror. "Theo—"

"I know, you don't have to say it. This'll give me a rugged edge." I grinned, but then my ribs seized and I began to cough so hard I wondered if the bastard had cracked one or two of them. Pain shot through my side with every rough hack, and I gripped the counter with one hand and held the tender spot around my ribs with the other, like I could keep them from breaking.

Shep cursed under his breath and then wrapped his arms tight around me to hold me together.

"You're okay," he murmured, over and over again, possibly more to himself than to me. In his arms my body relaxed, and slowly the coughing fit eased. "That's it," he said, rubbing my arms. "Just breathe."

I closed my eyes and took in a long, wheezing inhale, then another, until the band clamping down on my ribs eased and I could breathe normally again.

Shep's hold on me loosened, and then I felt his fingers move down to the edge of my shirt. "Can you lift your arms for me?"

I nodded even though I wasn't sure how well any of my body parts worked at this point. It was like lifting a fucking car to hold them up over my head, but I did it and that was what mattered.

With careful hands, he pulled my shirt off, and I had to grit my teeth so I didn't hiss in pain.

He tossed the shirt on the floor, and when I caught his eyes inspecting every inch of my body in the mirror, I could see the fury boiling over as his jaw clenched tight.

"Fuck."

I looked over the cuts along my wrists and arms and the deepening bruises, especially from the kicks to my ribs, and knew they would be looking even more gruesome tomorrow.

"Well," I said, "could be worse."

Shep shook his head and turned me to face him, leaning me back against the counter. Then his gentle fingers skimmed over my bruised skin. "Does it hurt to breathe?"

"No. But the coughing's a bitch."

"Probably just badly bruised, but we need to get you checked to see if any of your ribs are cracked."

I didn't even fight him on that one. I didn't have the energy. "Probably," I said, nodding.

Those concerned blue eyes met mine and then he cradled my head between his hands and gave me the sweetest kiss I'd ever gotten. Thank God I was propped up against the counter, because I sank into those pillowy-soft lips that felt like heaven. I hadn't thought I'd get a chance to feel him like this again, and it almost didn't feel real that I was here and we were safe.

If I didn't have the physical reminders, I would've thought the last few hours were nothing more than a nightmare.

"Let's get these off you," Shep murmured against my mouth as his hands moved down to the waist of my pants. But then he pulled away suddenly and cursed, and I opened my eyes to see him rushing to the tub to shut off the water. Just in time too, because it was dangerously close to spilling out, and he had to drain a few inches to give room for me to get in.

“Sorry,” he said, running his wet fingers through his hair to push it back before holding his hand out to me. “Where were we?”

“I believe you were trying to get me naked, mister.”

He pulled me toward him where he sat on the edge of the tub. I could see him swallow at the marks marring my body, but it didn’t stop him from unzipping my pants and pulling them and my boxer briefs down my legs.

As I stepped out of them, I realized Shep was eye level with my cock, and even with the amount of pain radiating through my body, my dick still jerked under his gaze.

Looking up at me, he gave me a small smile and then leaned forward, pressing a kiss to my shaft. But that was all the attention it got, because then he helped me into the tub. The feel of the warm water made me want to sink my entire body beneath it.

Only the cuts in my skin didn’t agree with that plan.

I sucked in a breath once the water got past my hips. “That stings like a bitch.”

“Not surprising, but we need to get them clean. The last thing you need is an infection out here in—”

“The jungle? This hellish landscape?”

Shep scoffed, straightened, and reached for his own shirt. “I was going to say ‘the middle of nowhere.’”

“Pretty sure they all mean the same thing.” My eyes trailed down over his rigid abs as he tossed his shirt aside, and it wasn’t lost on me that while the jungle had beaten the shit out of my body, it had somehow only made his look better.

Every muscle appeared more ripped than the next, his biceps bulging from cutting through thick vines to get to me, and don’t even get me started on his legs. My man had climbed through hell to reach me, and damn if he didn’t look better for the experience.

“You okay?”

“Huh?” I dragged my eyes up to his face to see a frown pulling between his brows.

“You look like you zoned out for a minute there. Do you feel okay?”

“I feel…” I took a deep breath and offered a small smile. “Very lucky that you’re mine.”

Shep’s lips quirked as he crooked a finger for me to shift forward, then he climbed into the enormous tub behind me. As I settled into his arms, he

kissed the shell of my ear and whispered, “Yours, huh?”

“Mhmm.” I sighed as Shep ran his hands along my thighs under the water, gently massaging my tired muscles. “You trekked through a deadly jungle to save me, *sooo* yeah, I’m thinking you’re mine. Either that or you’re just a glutton for punishment.”

“What was that you said a second ago? Pretty sure they mean the same thing.”

“You’re hilarious.”

“No, what I am is sorry.” Shep reached for my hands and entwined our fingers. “I’m so fucking sorry, Theo.”

I let his apology echo off the walls of the bathroom and swirl around us with the steam, not to punish him, but to really feel the emotion behind his words, and it was there, as strong as the steady beat of his heart. The strength and conviction were as clear as the actual words themselves.

Shep felt this to his core. He’d taken my kidnapping as some kind of punishment he deserved, and while I’d been angry at first with everything that had gone down, all I felt now was gratitude that this amazing human being was mine.

“You have nothing to be sorry about,” I finally said, bringing his hand up to my lips. “You came for me, you found me, you saved me.”

“Something I wouldn’t have had to do if I’d been open and honest from the second King walked into our bedroom.”

“*Our* bedroom?” I turned my head to look at him, a grin on my lips. “I like the sound of that. Can we have one of those in every safe house we own?”

“We can, but I’d rather not have to visit any more of them for a while.”

“Good point. But seriously, Shep, you don’t have anything to apologize for.” I swept my eyes over his stunning features, stopping on the cut by his cheek. I couldn’t help but reach up and stroke my fingers over it. “Plus, it’s not like you came out of this without a few cuts and scrapes to show for your effort. I think we can call it even.”

“Then that blow to your head must’ve rattled a few brain cells loose. I have plenty to atone for—”

“Shep—”

“—starting with how I spoke to you when King…interrupted us. I should’ve taken a moment to get on the same page as you. You were right. King could’ve waited, *should’ve* been made to fucking wait while *we*

worked out what *we* wanted to tell him. My only excuse is habit. I'm so used to falling in line, doing what I'm told that I never questioned it. Not until—"

Shep abruptly stopped, and while I wanted to demand he continue, I could sense he needed a moment to get his thoughts in order. A moment to process all that had happened. A moment to realize the nightmare was over.

"I never questioned it until you were gone. Until you were taken from me." Shep wrapped his arms around me, pulling me gently back against him, until his lips were pressed against my temple. "No one could've stopped me from getting to you after that."

I closed my eyes and relaxed back in his hold. "I knew that. Felt it somehow… Is that crazy?"

"No. I felt it too. That you were alive. That you were out there."

I wasn't one for overly soft moments or deep introspection, but as I lay there in the tub with Shep's arms warding off any and all danger, I felt a soul-deep connection to him unlike anything I'd ever felt before.

"I don't want to hide this anymore." Shep's words floated over me, making my heart skip and my pulse skyrocket. The last however many hours had been such a whirlwind of emotions that I wasn't sure I trusted myself to decipher what he was saying.

I needed to hear it in words. I needed him to be clear. I *needed* to know we were finally on the same page.

"Meaning…?"

"I almost lost you tonight." Shep brought a hand up to gently cradle my cheek. "I almost lost you before I ever really had you. I'm not going to risk that again. I'm never going to risk it again."

I leaned in to press a soft kiss to his perfect lips. "Are you asking me to go steady, Mr. Winchester?"

Shep's chest vibrated behind me, his low chuckle a seductive whisper across my damp skin. "Steady?"

"Isn't that what you Americans call it?"

He snorted, and it was so nice to see his face relax a little. It made me happy to give that to him.

"Maybe back in the fifties. But yes, I suppose I *do* want to go steady. I want to tell the rest of the guys. I want to date you—publicly. I want—"

"Me," I said, a smug grin stretching wide across my lips. "You, Shepard Winchester, want *me*. And you know what?"

“What?”

“I’m okay with that.”

He busted out a loud laugh at that, and *Dieu*, it sounded magnificent.

“Is that right?”

I nodded, moving back into his embrace. “Because I just happen to want you right back.”

Shep hummed as the water sloshed around us, lapping at our bodies, relaxing our aching muscles. “This is going to be complicated.”

It was my turn to laugh. “*Oui*, in every way. But you always did say I was a royal nightmare.”

“Maybe so…” Shep pressed a kiss to the top of my head, tightening his arms around me in a way that said he wasn’t about to let go anytime soon. “But I’m starting to think you’re my royal dream.”

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7

SHEP

"MORE BANDAGES," THEO murmured, shaking his head as I finished taping up his forearm. He'd definitely have a scar from where the fucker had taken out his tracker, a much longer one than the small cut Theo made when he'd done the same thing weeks ago. How had the guy even known about the tracker? Perhaps this was an inside job, someone within the Libertines feeding information to his hired hitmen.

"I'm almost done," I said as I squeezed out some antibiotic ointment and carefully applied it to his wrists. No permanent damage there, just raw, angry skin that needed to time to heal. After wrapping bandages around both wrists, I stepped back from the bathroom counter and ran my eyes over him again, looking for any wounds I may have missed.

"I look like a mummy, don't I?" He reached up to touch the bandage on his forehead and groaned.

"A very sexy mummy."

"You're a terrible liar." A smirk curved his full lips as he lowered himself from the counter to stand. I could see the way he tried to hide the wince that briefly crossed his face as he straightened, and I moved in close, wrapping my arms around him to hold his weight if he needed me to.

And, selfishly, because I couldn't bear the thought of being close and not touching him.

"I'd never lie to you." I pressed a kiss to the side of his neck and held him as he slid his hands around my waist. In the mirror, I could see the smooth expanse of his back, which sported only faint bruises, unlike the

rest of him. Theo's breaths were slow and steady, and I knew he had to be exhausted. Adrenaline was still riding me, and I wasn't sure I'd be able to sleep at all, but his body had taken a brutal beating and he needed rest.

I swept him up in my arms, and he let out a surprised curse as I carried him into my bedroom.

Correction: *our* bedroom.

"What the hell? My legs aren't broken, you know."

"You're tired."

"So are you."

"Just go with it."

"Like I have a choice," he said, but he was grinning as I gently set him on the bed. As he lay there, he reached for the towel at his waist and pulled it open. "Oops. You forgot something."

His gorgeous cock was on full display, but I forced myself to look away and reached down to pull the towel away instead.

Theo's hand covered mine. "I didn't mean the towel."

"Theo…"

"Shep." He moved our hands to rest on top of his dick, and it jerked under my touch.

"No," I said, shaking my head. "Your body needs to rest tonight. You're hurt."

"Are you really trying to tell me what I can and can't do? Maybe you've forgotten how I react to being ordered around." His fingers tightened on mine, giving his growing erection a squeeze and causing him to moan—and not in an *I'm in pain* way.

"And you must've forgotten I'm not one of your minions."

"I definitely haven't forgotten that. But after everything I've gone through, I feel like I deserve this."

"You think so, do you?" I swiped my thumb over the head of his shaft, and Theo nodded.

"*Oui*. It'll help me relax, and you're the one who said I need to rest."

I took in a deep breath and when the distinct scent of his arousal hit my nose, I groaned. "Okay—"

"Yesss—"

"—but you have to promise to just lie back and let me do the work."

Theo's grin was wide as he lifted his hand and slipped it with his other behind his head. "Don't threaten me with a good time."

“You’re incorrigible,” I said, and reached for my own towel, tossing it over the end of the bed. Then I climbed up on the mattress and stretched out beside him. “I mean it, Theo. If I think you’re hurting in any way, I’m going to stop.”

“The only thing that hurts right now is my di—”

I cut off his words before he could goad me further. He was already too tempting for the state he was in, and my need to be close to him was only tempered by the fact that parts of him were turning a horrible shade of purple.

But if this was going to help relax him, help ease the torment he’d gone through out there at the hands of that motherfucker, then I would give it to him.

I wrapped my hand around his thick, veiny shaft and gave a slow, rough pull that had a groan rumbling out of Theo’s chest. His eyes slid shut, and I couldn’t resist another taste.

I gently brushed my lips over his swollen one. When his breath caught, I wasn’t sure if it was from pain or pleasure. I went to raise my head to check he was okay, but then one of his hands came around the back of my neck to hold me in place.

Pleasure, that was what he was feeling, and I was determined to give him as much of it as he could take before he drifted off into a deep, restful sleep.

I stroked my fist down his erection, his pre-cum making a warm, sticky path along his length as I kissed my way to the corner of his mouth that wasn’t cut or bruised. Theo’s eyes slid shut as I began to kiss and nip my way along his jawline, working him with slow rhythmic pulls that had him moaning.

“God, Theo,” I whispered by his ear, marveling over the brave, resilient man beside me. Then I heard myself confessing, “I can’t ever lose you. You hear me?”

He turned his head on the pillow, and when his eyes opened, I felt the connection bone deep.

“You won’t,” he assured me, then pressed his lips to mine. “I’m right here. You found me. Saved me.”

My heart squeezed at the memory of how close I’d come to losing him. If I hadn’t heard the first gunshot and sprinted off in that direction, if I’d arrived even thirty seconds later…

“Stop,” Theo whispered against my mouth. “Stop thinking. Just be here with me.”

I took in a deep breath and focused back on the man lying beneath me, a bit battered, but alive.

He was right. I couldn’t control what happened, but the most important thing was he was here now—we both were.

I dove back between Theo’s lips, stroking my tongue alongside his and letting go of all the fear and anger that had been driving me since he’d been taken. I wanted to memorize every bit of him, every little sound he made, the way he tasted, the way he kissed and touched me. I’d taken it all for granted, not realizing how deep I’d been falling for him, so if there was one thing I’d realized in the last twenty-four hours, it was that I was crazy about Theo Rinaldi. And I wouldn’t let him go, even over my dead body.

“Don’t let this go to your head, but you have the sexiest fucking mouth.” Theo nibbled on my lower lip. “Maybe the best kisser I’ve ever had.”

“*Maybe*?” I growled and pulled my hand away from his cock, and he immediately reached down between us to put it back.

“I meant *definitely*. By far the best kisser. *Et tu suces ma queue comme un dieu.*”

That was it—I was taking French classes as soon as we were back in New York. Anything that came out of Theo’s mouth was something I wanted to hear, and I had a feeling he’d just said something about his dick. Or mine. Maybe both.

Smirking, I reached for the lube in the bedside drawer and then moved down his body, knowing exactly how I wanted to take care of my man tonight. Fucking was out of the question, because no matter how much he wanted it, his body wouldn’t be able to take it.

But a hot cock rub that would give him the release he needed? Abso-fucking-lutely.

I straddled him beneath his hips so I could line my throbbing erection up against his and then poured a healthy amount of lube into my hand. The second I began to stroke both of us together, a long moan of pleasure escaped him.

“*Oh, mon Dieu*,” Theo said, sucking in a breath as he watched. He clearly hadn’t been expecting me to get us both off at the same time, but we’d earned it, and this was exactly what we needed to rid ourselves of the

bad memories that lingered. They had no place here, not in this bed, and not between us.

Theo arched his hips up, chasing the slippery slide of my fist up and down our joined erections. God he felt so fucking good, and I relished the feel of every veiny, thick inch of him rubbing up against mine. One of us a little longer, one of us slightly thicker, but fitting together so perfectly I couldn't take my eyes away.

Every sound Theo made only spurred me on, wanting to make this a moment he'd remember. I alternated hands with every tug, starting from the base and working my fist up. It was instinctive to be more careful than I ever was with Theo, wanting to make him feel good without doing anything that could cause him pain.

I thought I was doing a pretty damn good job of it too, judging by how rock hard we both were, but then Theo growled and said, "I know what you're doing. Stop taking it easy on me. I'm not—"

Before he could utter the rest of that sentence, I tightened my grip of our cocks, putting them in a chokehold.

A hiss came through his gritted teeth, and my eyes shot up, making sure he was still with me. That he was still feeling nothing but pure pleasure. But all I saw was the arousal swirling in his eyes.

"Don't stop," he panted, licking those full, sexy lips.

I had no plan to. Not until he'd gone limp from pleasure after I'd wrenched every ounce of cum from his body.

Keeping us firm in my grip, I jerked us off as my balls pulled up tight. He was just so goddamn beautiful. Clenching the sheets as he lay there spread out on the bed, his strong, muscular body that had survived a battle on display… All I could think was *mine*. This unbelievable man was *mine*.

Possession so strong it physically rolled through me took over then, and as I circled my thumb over Theo's weeping slit, his breath hitched.

"Shep…" he started, but he didn't have to say the rest of what I knew he was feeling. He dropped his head back, beginning to jerk as his climax hit.

Hot jets of cum exploded from his cock, coating my hands and my own dick. Theo's French curses of satisfaction and his guttural moans set off my own orgasm, and as it rocketed through me, I shouted the name of the man who owned me now. I didn't think he even understood the power he held as he reached for my thighs and squeezed, urging me through the waves of ecstasy raining down over me.

“*Putain*. You’re so damn hot when you take what you want, you know that?” Theo said.

I was still breathing hard but managed a grin. “Looks like you’re rubbing off on me.”

“Uh, pretty sure that was you rubbing us both off. Damn.”

Fuck yeah I did, and I had to admit that Theo was right—that was exactly what we’d needed. The adrenaline that had been riding me had burned out, and now I felt the exhaustion setting in.

I let go of our softening dicks and moved up over Theo, pressing a kiss to his lips. “Don’t go anywhere.”

“Couldn’t even if I wanted to.” His eyelids were heavy as he smiled up at me and stretched his legs back out.

I went to the en suite and quickly cleaned up before returning to Theo’s side with a warm washcloth. He was barely awake as I wiped him down, but then I felt his hand cover mine and looked up.

“Lie with me.”

I’d never heard him sound so sweet, so vulnerable. Usually he’d try to deny wanting to spend all night together or make a joke about it, but he tugged me toward him, and I slid in behind him under the sheets.

“Always,” I whispered, tucking him under my arm and holding him close where he wasn’t bruised. He rested his head against my shoulder and inched closer, his breathing growing slower and steadier.

Just when I thought he was asleep, I heard, “Shep?”

“Yeah?”

His voice was thick with sleep. “Let’s get the fuck out of Brazil.”

I couldn’t help my burst of laughter then, because damn if I hadn’t been thinking the same thing. It was once a place of sanctuary, but there was nothing safe about staying here any longer.

“Tomorrow,” I promised, pressing a kiss against his temple as he curled in close.

It was time to get the hell out of the jungle and back to the city.

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8

SHEP

THE FAMILIAR SOUND of our brothers' voices drifted through the hallways of the underground rooms of Libertine, as Theo and I came to a stop at the bottom of the large stone stairwell that wound down to the tunnels below.

It'd been a couple of days since we'd landed back in New York City, and tonight was the decided-upon time that we would finally meet up with the rest of the Kings to discuss what had gone down.

If it were up to me, Theo would've been resting another week, at least, before venturing across town to relive the nightmare that had happened back in the jungle. But with the threat still at large, and a new piece of intel in our possession, we couldn't sit on this much longer.

Our brothers deserved answers, and to more than just what happened in Brazil. We owed them the truth about us. It was going to come out one way or another, and after the shitshow that happened with King, I wanted it to come from us.

Whoever was behind this threat had no compunction about using our relationship against us, and the only reason that worked right now was because no one knew. So it was time to take that piece off the table.

I'd be damned if I let anyone use what Theo and I had as a weapon, and the best way to take control was to own it. Theo was mine and I was his, and if anyone had a problem with that—including our brothers—then they could fuck the hell off.

“You okay?” Theo’s voice filtered through my irritable mood and landed right at the heart of my main concern.

Was I okay? I wasn’t sure. Every time I closed my eyes, the image of Theo on his knees, a second away from death, flashed to the forefront of my mind, and the red haze of anger that always followed made me feel on edge, seconds from exploding.

But as we stood at the base of the stairs about to go and meet up with our brothers, I knew I needed to get my shit under control.

“I’m good.” I tried for a smile, but when Theo snorted, I knew I’d failed.

“Relax,” he said, reaching for my hand and squeezing it tight. “You look like you’re about to burn the world down. And while that’s super hot, these are the good guys, remember?”

“I know, I’m just—”

“Wound tighter than a drum? *Oui*, I know. Really, Shep, you act like we just met. You’re always wound tight when you’re here. The good thing now is that you have me. If you like, I could take you into one of these rooms and help you relax before we go in there?”

I arched a brow in his direction. “Not helping.”

“I’m trying to,” he said, his swollen lip quirking to the side and reminding me all over again what that motherfucker had done to him.

I reached for his face and brushed my thumb over the cut in his lip. “I’m good, really. Just not looking forward to reliving this. That’s all.”

“Okay.” Theo started down the hall, his hand still in mine. “So it’s not because you’re about to admit that you’re head over heels for me to a bunch of guys who think I’m a lunatic?”

I drew him to a halt and locked eyes with him, and while he might be joking, *I* was not something I ever wanted him to doubt.

“There is not one person’s opinion on this earth that I give a fuck about when it comes to you and me. Do you understand that? It doesn’t matter if it’s old man Francisco in the bodega at the corner or the men waiting for us in the conference room down the hall.” I took Theo’s chin and angled his head up toward mine. “When it comes to you and me, I’m not hiding anymore. Not from anyone.”

Theo closed the couple of inches between us and ghosted his lips over mine. “So fucking sexy, Mr. Winchester.”

I hummed against his mouth. “We need to get in there.”

“Are you sure? I’d really rather you get in me—”

“Theo.” I pulled away, knowing that if I didn’t, we’d never do what we came here to. I tugged him down the hall. “Let’s get this over with.”

“You’re the boss,” he said, then chuckled. “Literally.”

We reached the door to the conference room, and it wasn’t lost on me that Theo’s steps slowed a little too. But just when I thought he might drop my hand to enter, he entwined his fingers through mine and walked inside, head held high like the prince he was—and I’d never been prouder of him.

He wasn’t about to let a few bruises and cuts define who he was, and he wasn’t about to run from the questions he was about to be faced with. But when the five men sitting at the enormous granite table spotted him, all talking ceased and wide smiles of relief crossed their mugs.

“Theo. Damn, but you’re a sight for sore eyes.” Lucien was the first to get to his feet, and Benoit followed, giving a mock bow.

“*Bon retour parmi nous,* Your Serene Highness.”

Lachlan shook his head, his eyes tracking over and cataloguing every bruise and cut he could see on his brother. Then he growled, “The motherfucker who did that to your face better be dead.”

“He is,” I said, straightening my shoulders with pride.

“Limb from limb?”

Before I could say I’d planned on just that, Theo interjected. “He was left for the vultures in the jungle. I doubt there’s anything left of him.”

Lachlan clapped me on the shoulder. “Goddamn right.”

With Lachlan being the most savage of our crew, I supposed that was a compliment, but I didn’t get a chance to answer him because King finally stepped forward, and the guys parted to let him through.

All joking ceased as King’s gaze fell to mine and Theo’s clasped hands, and just like that, our brothers finally noticed the elephant in the room. Their relief at seeing Theo alive had overtaken anything else, but now the surprise had them looking between us and King to gauge our leader’s reaction.

Theo squeezed my hand then, his reassurance all I needed as King came to a stop in front of us. I could feel the tension creeping into the room as we watched and waited for what came next. King had made it clear to me he didn’t approve of my relationship with Theo, had even dared say he wasn’t right for me, and remembering that only pissed me off.

King met my eyes, those dark depths unreadable, but when they cut to Theo, I saw it. A spark of emotion, regret and relief, the two battling it out as King rested his hands on Theo's shoulders.

"Glad to see Shep brought you back safe to us."

Theo's eyes narrowed slightly.

Oh shit.

"Yeah, he did," Theo said. "No thanks to y—"

"I'm just glad I heard the gunshot that alerted me to where he was," I interjected, giving Theo's hand a squeeze. "If I'd gotten there a few seconds later then he wouldn't be standing here right now."

King's eyes met mine. "You were right to stay."

I heard the rest of that sentence, what he didn't say. *And I was wrong.*

Would it come eventually? King wasn't the apologizing type, but there definitely needed to be a conversation about the shit that went down—just not right now, in front of everyone.

"Will you tell us what happened?" The question came from the man standing apart from the rest of us, his arms crossed over his t-shirt and his long, dark hair hanging down to shade his face. The look of him took me by surprise, because this wasn't the sarcastic, animated Alessio I was used to. His face was more drawn, dark circles beneath eyes that looked…defeated. I'd never seen him as anything less than confident to the extreme, but it was obvious he'd been through it the last few weeks.

King stepped back and gestured for us all to take a seat at the table. I took my spot to the left of him, only this time instead of sitting on King's right as he usually did, Theo moved to the chair on the other side of me.

I watched as Lucien raised his brows before he took Theo's empty spot, shifting the dynamics of our group with a simple move. Simple, yet significant, and my chest grew warm as Theo lounged back and shot me a wink.

When everyone was settled, I looked over at King. "Where should we start?"

"At the beginning."

"Oh boy," Theo muttered, taking out a kretek and lighting up.

Hell, I didn't smoke, but it would've probably been smart to, considering the direction the conversation was about to head. Before we'd arrived, Theo told me he wanted me to take the lead on recounting the last few weeks, and remembering how hard it'd been to get information out of

him in the first place, I figured it was the best way to go. Otherwise we'd be here all night.

I started at the beginning, from the very first threat we'd received, and laid it all out there. From the fake videos of Theo supposedly causing an explosion in Istanbul, to the intimate photos taken of us in Osaka, and what happened with Theo's attempted assassination in Cardiff, I told and showed them everything. We didn't have anything to hide, not anymore, and it was past time we all got on the same page.

"The explosion was fake?" Benoit asked, confusion marring his brow as he glanced at Alessio for confirmation. I answered instead.

"The explosion in Istanbul happened. It just wasn't because of Theo. Someone doctored the video."

"But—"

"I said it wasn't fake," Alessio said, staring down at the table. "I was wrong."

The entire group went silent, and Lachlan looked like his jaw had just become unhinged. Those three words had never come out of Alessio's mouth before, and the fact that he was so obviously down on himself rattled me in a way I hadn't expected.

"The photos of you in Osaka are real, though?" Lucien asked carefully.

I nodded.

"And the man who set the car explosion, the one you took out in Cardiff," Lucien said to Theo. "He and the man who kidnapped you, you think both are working for the same person?"

Theo blew out a stream of smoke and tapped his kretek against the crystal ashtray. "Looks like it."

"Looks like it? You didn't question them?"

"It was a little life-or-death, so no, I didn't tie them up and interrogate them. My bad."

Lachlan shrugged. "I wouldn't have either."

"No one blames you, *mon ami*," Benoit said. "But it's not exactly helpful in discovering who is accountable for the attacks on you."

"We believe it's in-house," King said. "A Libertine member who's been flying under the radar. Perhaps playing a long game."

"So we interrogate them all, one by one." Lachlan sat up and cracked his knuckles. "I've got a few methods that'll have them coming clean in no time."

“We’re not torturing our members.”

“You just said we have a traitor in our midst.”

“So you think the best way to draw them out is clue them in by torturing everyone else?” Lucien asked. “What if he’s not one of the first? You don’t think people will talk? Leave? Retaliate?”

“We’re not. Torturing. Our members.” King’s booming proclamation was final.

Again, silence descended, until Lachlan threw up his hands.

“Then who has a better idea how to catch this motherfucker?”

Benoit rubbed his forehead. “I’m still confused why they went to the trouble of creating the fake video of Theo if they just wanted to kill him.”

“I wondered that too,” I said. “But what better way to sow distrust between us? To have us all wondering if Theo had gone rogue? To try to blackmail Theo and me with photos, threatening to go to King? It’s clear to me that whoever this is, they want to break the seven of us apart. They want us fighting and they don’t want us to trust each other. If they’d killed Theo, they knew we’d end up blaming each other for what we did or didn’t do.”

“We can’t let them break us,” Lucien said, nodding in agreement. “No matter what. This fucker is smart, but he’s not the only one who can fight dirty.”

“There’s another thing.” Theo set his cigarette in the ashtray and pulled up his sleeve, where an ugly red line ran down the length of his forearm. “He knows about our trackers. Pulled mine the fuck out.”

Curses rang out, but I raised my voice over them. “It’s not like members wouldn’t have seen us scan our chips to get down here.”

“But to know they’re trackers…” Benoit mused, tapping his lips before he shot up in his seat. “Holy shit. What if he’s gained access *to* our trackers. Is that how he found Shep and Theo at the safe house?”

Instantly, I felt King tense beside me.

That was exactly the question he’d been hoping wouldn’t be brought up, and there it was, laid out for everyone to hear.

King had fucked up.

He had brought danger right to our goddamn door.

And then he’d left Theo in the jungle.

I clenched my teeth, trying not to let accusations fly out of my mouth. It wouldn’t solve anything to fight with him now, not when we were all trying to come back together.

But I was pissed, *so* fucking pissed, and trying my damndest to bite my tongue and see if our leader had anything to say.

All I could hear was the jackhammering of my heart as the room remained dead silent. I didn't dare look at King, not right now, because there was no way I could keep a poker face if he didn't come clean.

Theo, on the other hand, clearly didn't give a fuck about the question hanging in the air, or the repercussions.

He picked up his cigarette, tapped the ashes, and looked straight at the man to my left.

"Great question, Benoit. Why don't we ask King?"

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9

THEO

OUI, *YOU HEARD right, oh fearless leader—explain thyself.*

I hadn't planned to call King out in front of everyone at tonight's meeting. In fact, I'd thought I'd gotten over the way he led my captor to the jungle and then decided to abandon me there once it seemed I was out for the count. But as I sat beside Shep, in a room full of my brothers who were asking questions they all deserved the answers to, I realized I wasn't fucking over it.

King had left me in the goddamn jungle.

I could maybe understand that if it had been a day or three in and there was no sign of me or if I had, I don't know, any form of survival training. But this was *me* we were talking about. The Prince of Monaco. A man who'd grown up in a literal castle, for fuck's sake.

So what in the hell had he been thinking?

Shep had said King surmised my kidnapper might've left with me, which I *supposed* was plausible, since that had in fact been the plan. But he didn't know that for certain.

Thank God Shep had had less faith in my jungle skills. I was a badass under most circumstances, but he'd known I'd need saving from that hellhole, because even if I'd been at full capacity, those spiders, anacondas, and demon bats would've had me curled up and rocking in a corner.

A shiver raced through me at the thought.

"What's he talking about, boss?" Lachlan was the first to speak up, uncaring of the tense silence that had fallen over the table.

Shep was stiff as a statue beside me and, judging by the twitch in his jaw, was doing his level best not to lose his shit—whether it be on King or me, the jury was still out. Benoit and Lucien were focused on their leader, eyes narrowed as they seemed to sense something was rotten in Denmark, and Alessio…

Well, he was busy studying his hands beneath the table. The guy had barely looked twice at me since we'd arrived and was doing everything in his power to avoid looking at King.

"Nothing we need to get into now," King said, pushing to his feet.

"Aw, don't be like that," I said, stamping out my kretek, my apparent death wish still firmly intact even after my brief brush with it. "No one here is going to judge anyone else's actions. After all, you all gave *me* the benefit of the doubt when you heard about what was being said and had apparently been done…didn't you?"

I knew very fucking well that wasn't the case and that my brothers and King had had their suspicions about the bombing and my removing of my tracker—which, granted, was the whole point of whatever this plan, scheme, in-house treason was all about, right?

But the fact that they'd all questioned me still stung.

So sue me if I wanted to get a few jabs in of my own.

"Theo," Shep said, then placed a hand over mine on the table, and I wasn't sure if it was the move or the distraction itself that had King turning on his heel and heading for the door.

Either way, *I* wasn't distracted, and I wasn't letting him go without a final comment.

"Your leaving seems to be a running theme lately—"

"*Theo*." Shep's voice was much harsher then, cutting through the sudden tension in the air like a knife. He'd wanted to keep things all copacetic now that we were back, and sure, maybe we'd get there. But not yet. Not until King acknowledged his part in all of this.

King's broad shoulders stiffened as he stopped in the doorway, and then he glanced back at me, dark eyes full of an emotion I'd never seen before—guilt.

"We'll talk about this," he said as though we were the only two in the room. "But not here. Not now. I need to go. I have some phone calls to make. But Theo?"

"*Oui?*"

“I *am* glad you’re back. And I’m glad you’re safe. We will get to the bottom of this.”

I gave a clipped nod and, as he walked out of the room, finally let out the breath I hadn’t realized I was holding.

Dieu. I hadn’t known how angry I was at him. How frustrated I was in his lack of faith in me. How disappointed I was that he found me lacking when it came to being good enough for Shep—

Oh shit, Shep.

I turned to see that intense blue stare zeroed in on me, his mouth pulled into an all-too-serious line. When I gave an absent shrug, a sexy smirk curved his full lips right before he leaned in and planted a long, hard kiss on me.

“Holy shit.”

“Do we need to step outside?”

“*Une fois que tu as goûté au charme à la Monégasque, tu ne reviens pas en arrière.*”

“I knew it.”

That last voice belonged to Lucien, and as Shep pulled back and grinned at me, I said, “Bullshit. You didn’t know a damn thing.”

“I called it at the wedding, but Kai didn’t believe me.”

“The wedding?” Benoit’s mouth fell open. “As in your brother’s wedding?”

My eyes shot to Shep, who didn’t look surprised by Lucien’s words. “Wait, you told him?”

Shep shook his head, but before he could say more, Lucien added, “You were both flushed and disheveled after you came back from making sure his ass showed up to the altar. Shep, you were even bleeding—”

“Whoa, Theo’s a biter? Now why does that surprise me?” Lachlan said.

Shep shrugged. “We were…fighting.”

“Yeah, fighting and fucking.”

I brought Shep’s hand up to my mouth and teased his middle finger between my teeth, giving just enough pressure that he arched a brow.

Unfortunately for us, our brothers weren’t done with us yet.

“Is that why King was extra irritable today?” Benoit waggled his brows at us, doing his best to be an instigator. Apparently dating a dangerous arms dealer meant the few fucks he’d ever given had gone right out the window.

“Does he not approve of this new development because it’s Theo or because it’s anyone with Shep?”

Not one of the loudmouths had anything to say then as they all stared at the two of us and waited for the answer.

But the answer was…both. At least from where I was sitting, and King wasn’t here to give us his take on it either.

Shep finally cleared his throat and said, “You’ll have to ask him.”

“No way in hell am I asking him,” Lachlan said, holding his hands up. “It was your question, Benny—you fuckin’ ask.”

“Do I look like I have a death wish?”

“Your boyfriend is a scary motherfucker, so yeah, I think you do.”

Benoit waved him off and turned his attention back to us. “You have to give us all the juicy details. Did this start at the wedding or before? Who initiated it? My guess is Theo, but I’ll be proud if it was Shep.” When he took a sip of his drink, I thought he was done, but he continued to fire off questions. “Are you two just hooking up or is it serious? Is it even allowed, or is that why King is pissed? Did he find out about you two and that’s why he came to the safe house? Are you—”

“Jesus, Benoit, take a breath,” Alessio said, the first time he’d spoken since King left. The fact that he was so quiet and not giving us hell was rubbing me the wrong way, because he was by far the most sarcastic shit in the group—and that included myself.

“This is important information, so why you aren’t contributing to this conversation, I have no idea.” Benoit looked personally offended, but Alessio wasn’t even looking up from the table.

“I saw their trackers,” was all he said, and Benoit gasped.

“You knew this whole time? *Merde*, why does no one talk to each other anymore?”

“Poor Benny doesn’t have a reliable gossip partner,” I said. “But I don’t have a tracker anymore anyway, so if you’re going to try to spy—”

“I’ll replace it for you today,” Alessio said, picking at the leather band around his wrist.

“Alessio.” Shep waited until Alessio finally looked up, and then he leaned forward. “None of this is your fault. You hear me? You’ve done everything you can, and you can’t continue to beat yourself up—”

“Yes, I fucking can.” Alessio slammed his fist on the table. “This guy should’ve been taken care of already. Theo shouldn’t have been taken.

Those videos should've been an easy fake to spot. Neither of you should've had to hide or go to a fucking safe house in the first place. So yeah, I failed. I'm still failing. This *asshole* is still out there and I'm no closer to finding him than I was a few weeks ago."

I hated the look of defeat on his face and radiating off him in waves. For so many years he'd been the one we relied on, but no one was all-powerful. "Alessio, you're not the only one who can fix this," I said. "We're all here, together, and we'll come up with a plan. We *will* find this guy."

Alessio only scoffed, not even looking at us as he ran a hand over his face.

"Would it help if I told you I have information?"

All eyes shot to me, and I felt Shep's hand squeeze my thigh in support. I'd never felt that before, and certainly not sitting here at the Kings table. I'd always felt confident in myself and my place in the world, but having Shep beside me gave me a feeling I'd never expected, like I was anchored somehow—like I could do anything and he'd be right there no matter what.

Maybe that was why I felt so sure that what I'd overheard the night I was taken was the key to uncovering who was behind all the chaos of the last few weeks.

"When I woke up in the cave, I heard him on the phone," I said as the room went deadly silent. "He was talking about our transport the next morning, and then he disagreed with whoever was on the other end of the line. He said, 'That's not where you told me.' Then he mentioned 'Mott,' like it was the place he'd be taking me."

"Mott," Lucien murmured, brows knitted together as he drummed his fingers on the table. "Does that sound familiar to anyone?"

"That could be anywhere," Lachlan said. Sarcasm dripped off his words as he added, "Did he mention what kind of place he planned to take you to? That could help narrow it down to a few million hits."

"Yeah, he was real specific on that call," I said. "Even tossed out his bank account numbers and home address."

"Fair enough."

"Mott," Alessio repeated, sitting forward. "Did he say anything else?" When I shook my head, he pushed back from the table and got to his feet. "I'll take care of this."

Without another word, he started toward the door, and I jumped up. "Alessio, wait. This isn't on you. Let's figure it out together."

He spun around, eyes wild and narrowed, looking like a man out for vengeance. “Let me handle this. I’m going to find this motherfucker.” He looked at us one at a time, like he dared us to disagree, and then continued toward the door. I thought I heard him say under his breath, “If it’s the last fucking thing I do,” before he slammed it behind him.

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10

SHEP

"WELL. I THINK we shocked the shit out of everyone tonight." Theo moved his hands beneath my jacket to curl his fingers under the waist of my pants. I leaned back against the wall of the private elevator that led up to my loft as he stepped in closer. "Although I don't believe for a second Lucien had a clue."

I was careful wrapping my arms around him, since his ribs were still tender and his bruises had turned a violent blackish-purple that made me want to shoot that kidnapping motherfucker again every time I saw them.

"Actually, I think he did," I said, angling my head as Theo nibbled the sensitive skin beneath my ear. "He gave me a look at the wedding and I told him to mind his fucking business."

"You did have such a stick up your ass that day." He grinned, and as the elevator doors opened up directly into my loft, he backed out, pulling me with him by the fingers he had curled into my pants.

I put my hand over his, stopping him from going any farther. He glanced at me over his shoulder, but something in my expression had him turning around and asking, "What's wrong?"

Shaking my head, I drew him in close and took his lips with mine the way I'd been wanting to for hours. Sure, I'd stolen a kiss at Libertine, but it was nowhere near enough to satisfy the need I felt to keep him this close. It wasn't even just desire with Theo now, but an overwhelming possession that I couldn't fight even if I wanted to. The second we'd decided to do this,

I was all in. It was just the way it was, the way *I* was, and I didn't know how to be any less.

My hands were gentle as I held his head between them, but my mouth was anything but as it crashed down on his, my tongue sweeping past his lips to get a thorough taste. He let out a muffled moan of surprise and pleasure, kissing me back with the hunger I felt. There was something addictive about the faint taste of his clove cigarettes that lingered, a sweetness that balanced Theo's sarcasm and intensity, a flavor that was so uniquely *him*, and I couldn't get enough.

Tonight it wasn't even about the sexual desire I felt anytime he was near. No, it'd been a long couple of days, and just his being out for a few hours had to be taxing on his body. He'd been yawning in the car until we arrived at my place in Tribeca, but I didn't expect this second wind to last much longer.

I kissed him until we were both breathless, until Theo was looking up at me with dazed eyes.

"You kiss me like you've missed me."

"I have."

"I was beside you all night."

"Are you complaining?"

His grin grew wide even though it strained on the side that was still healing. "I'll never complain about you being obsessed with me."

"You say that now…"

"I do, and I'll say it tomorrow and a year from now. Ten years from now. A hundred—"

My groan and eye roll cut off his words. "Now you're just making fun of me."

"Would I do that?" When I arched a brow, he chuckled and hauled me in close. "Be obsessed with me, Shep. Because I sure as fuck can't get enough of you."

Butterflies exploded in my chest as he sealed that confession, his lips taking mine. I could feel the way he meant it as he kissed me, and it made everything that happened over the last few hours—the worry, the fear, the what-ifs—all fade into the background.

Nothing else mattered with Theo Rinaldi's mouth on mine—

Until his stomach gave a ravenous growl.

“Oh shit,” I said, pulling back. “You didn’t eat before we left, did you?”

“I meant to. But…”

I nodded. “I know. I couldn’t either.” It went without saying that despite our being confident in our decision to come out to our brothers, it still had nerves kicking up.

“I’ll go whip something up real quick,” I said before pressing one last kiss to Theo’s lips.

He nodded, rubbing his stomach. “I’ll help you.” But then he smothered a yawn, and as much as I wanted his company now, he needed the rest.

“Why don’t you go relax and kick your feet up? I’ve got this, and it’s been a long day.”

“I’m fine,” he said, but yawned again. This time I didn’t have to say anything—he held his hands up in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’m going. But let me know if you need my help.”

“So you can burn down my kitchen? I’m good.”

He shot me a glare, but the fact that nothing sarcastic came out of his mouth told me just how exhausted he was.

Needing something quick and easy, I decided on something I knew Theo liked: croque monsieur. I had everything I needed, since I’d made a delivery order yesterday to restock my fridge. Being gone for weeks meant I had little food, and I’d been listening out for any meals Theo mentioned that he enjoyed.

Croque monsieur being one of them, of course.

It didn’t take long before I was pulling out the bubbly ham and cheese sandwiches from the oven, plating them, and then heading into the living room area of the spacious loft to—

See Theo passed out on the couch.

He hadn’t even managed to kick his shoes off or grab a blanket.

I put the plates down on the coffee table and grabbed up a blanket. Then, careful not to wake him, I gently covered him. He looked so peaceful lying there, so at home in my house that it made my stomach flip.

It was hard to believe this was the same man I used to butt heads with on the regular. That only months earlier I would’ve laughed in the face of anyone suggesting that Theo and I could or would be anything more than friends. But as I stared down at the beautiful man resting so peacefully in my living room, I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else.

In the span of a couple of months, Theo had gone from being the rebellious, irresponsible chaos king I had to watch over to the sexy troublemaker I couldn't seem to take my eyes off. Something that didn't seem to be changing in any way, even now that we were back in the States.

The fact that our brothers had taken the news so well was shocking in and of itself. It was hard for me to even believe how strong this new relationship between us was. But there was no denying it.

With every day that passed, Theo and I grew closer. I supposed that was what happened when you threw in a few life-or-death situations. It helped propel us toward deciding whether we wanted to be with each other.

Something we both seemed to be on the exact same page about.

This was not a passing fling. It had gone way beyond a few fucks to ease the tension and barreled headfirst into relationship territory. We were a *couple*. Something neither of us had been looking for, or particularly wanting at this time in life, but had somehow fallen into anyway.

We'd made that decision when we told King, confirmed it when we told our brothers, and now that we were back in New York and his family and mine would start sniffing around soon, I wondered how long it would be until we had to tell them too.

It was a discussion we hadn't had yet, but one that needed to happen. We were both highly public figures, men that the world would take an interest in.

But there was time to worry about that later, time to think about all the logistics that would come with that announcement. But I still couldn't stop my smile at knowing that there *would* be an announcement of some sort at some time.

That was the one thing I'd always struggled with when dating King—keeping *us* a secret. He'd always thought our relationship was too risky to be public, too high profile, and while I'd understood, it always kind of grated on me. It had made things between us contentious. He'd sworn it was all about the connections people might make between us, business, and Libertine. But it was hard not to take it more personally, not to feel it was somehow *me* he was hiding.

Theo was definitely not worried about people knowing about our connection. Hell, it'd been all I could do to keep him from outing us to the world before now with his overt public displays of affection and penchant for public sex acts.

The man was an absolute deviant and didn't care one way or another who knew it. He was wild, confident, and one hundred percent uncaring of others' opinions, and that was so damn hot it was difficult to behave myself when he turned that charm my way.

Something I wouldn't change now for the world.

I grabbed up my laptop and took one of the recliners opposite Theo, wanting to keep an eye on him even though he seemed out of the woods now.

The information he'd told me back at the jungle and again tonight with our brothers still niggled at the back of my mind. *Mott…* One word that really could be anything. But according to Theo, it seemed like a location his captor had been planning to take him.

Alessio had said he was going to work on it, and while I didn't want to step on his toes in any way, I also couldn't sit around and do nothing.

I connected my earbuds and logged into our secure network. When I saw that Alessio was online, I pulled up a chat box to ask if he was available. He replied *yes*, and seconds later, we were connecting via video chat.

Now, I wasn't usually one to judge how another dressed or looked in their own time, and Alessio, well, his style definitely wasn't mine. But if I'd thought he looked rough earlier tonight, he looked like absolute shit now.

His long hair hung down around his face, the stubble on his cheeks looked longer than I could ever remember seeing it, and the dark circles around his eyes were becoming more and more prominent with every hour he didn't sleep.

Add in the fact he was sitting in his bat/tech cave with barely any light and he looked like crap. Or a runaway from a nineties grunge band.

"What do you need?"

Okay, so not exactly the greeting I'd been hoping for, but the one I'd expected after his outburst earlier. It was obvious Alessio was carrying around a heavy dose of guilt about everything that had gone down with Theo, and while we all knew he was doing his best, he didn't give a fuck, knowing he hadn't been able to work out who was behind this.

But I wasn't here to try to assuage him of that guilt. Hell, I knew all about feeling guilty—I was busy carrying around my own load.

We'd all have to deal with that in our own way and our own time, but right now we needed to come together to work out what the *fuck* this new

piece of information meant—and Alessio would just have to suck it up and work with me, because I wasn't going to sit back and twiddle my goddamn thumbs.

Keeping my voice low, so as to not wake Theo, I said, "I want to know how your search is going."

Alessio grunted and leaned back in his seat. "Clearly awesome, since I haven't contacted you."

I narrowed my eyes and tried to remind myself he was going through something. But honestly, we were *all* going through something, and I was getting sick and tired of his surly-ass attitude.

"Clearly, but that doesn't mean you might not have come up with some ideas, places to look, possible locations…"

"All of which I'll tell you when I work it out."

"I don't want to wait until then."

"Meaning?"

"I want to work with you."

There was a pause, and then, "I don't *do* that."

"And I don't fucking care," I said a little louder than I meant to, and when Theo shifted on the couch but didn't wake, I let out a breath. "Listen, I know you usually work solo, but I can't just sit here and do nothing, okay?"

Alessio sighed and moved back in closer to the screen. "I think it's a street or road or something like that. I don't know where exactly yet, but if we're going off the idea that whoever this motherfucker is is part of Libertine, then I'm thinking something local."

"Yeah, I could see that for sure."

"And based off that, we have a Mott Street that runs through Chinatown—"

"You don't think that's a little…obvious?"

"I think it's *super* fucking obvious, but that might also be the appeal." Alessio ran his hand through his hair and turned to the computer on his right. "Doing all this right under our nose, in our backyard? It would track with it being an inside job."

That thought pissed me the hell off—that they would have some sort of meeting place here in our city. Fuck that.

"Let's check it out," I said, and opened a secure browser to pull up a map. "Great, only a half-mile of restaurants, shops, and buildings to sift

through.”

Alessio grunted, then his face was back in the camera. “Theo didn’t mention anything else he might’ve heard?”

My eyes shifted above the computer screen to where Theo lay sleeping peacefully for the first time in days.

“No.” I shook my head and looked back to see Alessio’s mouth twisted into a thoughtful expression.

“He was being taken there, right? That’s what that fucker said?”

“Right.”

“Theo was pretty beat up when you got to him—”

“Don’t remind me.”

“—so I doubt they’d want to walk him into a restaurant or through the shops. So what else is on this street? Look for somewhere they could hide someone. Somewhere they could get him in and out of without—”

“Notice. I know, this isn’t my first rodeo.”

Alessio gave a clipped nod and turned back to his screen. We worked in silence for several minutes, each poring over different maps and businesses that ran along Mott Street, looking for a place that would work when taking someone—no, not just someone, the Prince of Monaco—hostage.

“Here’s something,” Alessio muttered, and shared his screen.

“A storage unit.”

“Right. It’s at the quieter end of Mott, there’s twenty-four seven access, it’s the perfect place to hide something or some*one* away…”

“But there’d be cameras everywhere.”

“That this fucker has proven he could easily hack.” Alessio shrugged. “I’d be able to get in their system in seconds and shut them down. No one would have a clue.”

A storage unit. That felt almost…plausible.

There was only one problem: “How the fuck are we going to narrow down and see what’s in each unit?”

For the first time since this whole shitstorm with Theo had started, a spark entered Alessio’s dark eyes.

“Leave that with me.”

“Are you sure?”

“I’ll search all the renters. I told you, I can get in their system in seconds and have their inventory and bank accounts in a couple of hours.”

There was the Alessio I remembered.

“You’ll call me?”

“The minute I’m done.”

“I feel good about this,” I said, nodding as I zoomed in on the picture of the storage map online. *Are you really so arrogant you were going to bring him back to* my *city?*

“Don’t get too excited,” Alessio said, intruding on my thoughts. “I’ve hit several dead ends with this asshole before.”

“Not this time. You’ve got this.” *And then I’m going to finish him.*

Alessio gave a final nod before ending the call, and as I closed the laptop and looked over to where Theo lay in slumber, I vowed to avenge what had been done to him—but this time to the one who had orchestrated it all.

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11

THEO

I WOKE UP the next morning to find Shep on a video call with the rest of our brothers, their voices elevated as they took turns firing off their plan of attack.

Wait—*attack*?

What the hell did I miss?

I barely remembered passing out on the couch, but considering I woke up in Shep's bed, I must've stumbled into it at some point. Unless he carried my ass, which I would've paid to see.

What had they all been doing while I was out?

Ripping off the covers, I stumbled out of bed and over to where I could see Shep sitting at his office setup in one corner of the loft, each screen showing a different brother, which raised the question—why hadn't he woken me up for this meeting?

"We'll enter in teams of two," King said, and that was when I noticed a blueprint on one of Shep's screens.

"What's going on?" I asked.

Shep looked over his shoulder at me, and the determined look on his face had me wondering if they'd found the motherfucker.

"Jesus Christ, Theo, do you want me to bleach my eyeballs?" Lachlan said, shielding his eyes. "Put some goddamn pants on."

I looked down at where my morning wood was doing its best to punch out of my flimsy boxer briefs and shrugged. "You're welcome."

"That is *not* welcome."

“My dick or me? Because it looks like you’re having a meeting that you were fine to let me sleep through.”

Shep reached for my hand, threading our fingers together. “You were exhausted, so I figured we could get the logistics together before I woke you.”

“Logistics for what?”

Shep nodded toward one of the screens. “Alessio, wanna take this?”

As Alessio clued me in on what was happening, I could feel Shep’s anticipation radiating off him.

“So you really think our answer could be in a public storage unit? That *that’s* where he was planning to take me?” I wanted to feel as confident as the others seemed to be, but it just didn’t seem likely. Surely this fucker would’ve wanted to hold me somewhere private, in a basement of a house or something, but somewhere people had access to?

“Shep and I spent all night searching Mott in Manhattan,” Alessio said. “I’ve gone through every deed, every company on every street and business with the name Mott. Narrowed it down by searching associations with anyone at Libertine, and long story short, one of the only large storage units in the city is located on Mott Street. Usually it’s just a bunch of mini units all over, so I started digging, and there’s a unit tied to an untraceable company that just so happens to be located at—”

“This Mott Street storage,” I finished. “But that could be any sketchy asshole wanting to hide their shit.”

“Well, that’s what we’re going to find out,” Shep said, tugging me closer to run his hand up my thigh. “This is just the first of what could be many leads, but I have a good feeling about it. Only a smug bastard would choose something right under our noses.”

I ran my thumb across his lips, wishing I could feel as hopeful as he did. But a lead was a lead, and I was down for whatever we needed to do to make the fucker pay.

“All right, then,” I said, looking up at my brothers and trying not to notice that King had averted his eyes. “What’s the plan?”

IT WAS CLOSING in on ten o’clock that night when our van slowed to a stop a few doors down from the public storage entrance. We’d learned they only kept one employee at the front desk for security after nine, but we had just the right man to keep him occupied.

Benoit grinned as he leaned over to the driver's seat, where his scary arms dealer boyfriend, Dimitri Stavros, put the van into park.

"Aw, don't look so put out, *mon monstre*," Benoit said, planting a kiss along the jagged scar on the side of Dimitri's face. "Being a lookout man is an important job too. After all, it's usually mine."

"Then let's switch," Dimitri said in a low growl.

"Oh yes, because you're the perfect person to charm the man inside."

"More like send him off screaming," I said, and when Dimitri's eyes met mine in the rearview mirror, I winked at him. "I mean that with the utmost respect, of course."

"It's time." King's firm tone had the van going silent before he nodded at Benoit. "You're up."

"My time to shine," Benoit singsonged as he checked his face in the pull-down passenger mirror and adjusted his earpiece and pinhole camera.

"You need me, you call. Got it?" Dimitri said as Benoit reached for the handle.

"I know, I know. You'll come in and kill everyone. But I think it's important we keep a low profile tonight, *mon monstre*. Don't you?"

Dimitri grumbled something I didn't quite make out before pulling Benoit in and pressing a hard kiss to his lips. Seconds later, Benoit was slipping out of the car and stepping inside the building.

"You really think this is something?" I asked Shep again as I stared out the tinted window at the building across from us.

"I do. Something about this place just feels right."

I nodded, thinking about all the information Alessio had brought forward. It did seem to line up and point to this destination, and if Shep's gut was telling him this was the spot, who was I to argue?

Hell, he'd found me in the middle of a damn jungle. I had to believe he'd be able to find this asshole in New York. Shep knew this place better than any of us.

"*Bonsoir*, is it…Melvin?"

I snorted as Benoit's snobbish observation came across the speaker inside the van, and shifted to look at the screen attached to the dashboard where we all had a prime view of "Melvin."

"Yeah, hi," he said as Benoit shifted to the side to get a look at the computer on the desk beside him.

"Busy night?"

Melvin looked around the small, empty lobby and then back to his nosy customer with a *what the fuck do you think?* look.

"I was wondering if you could be a dear and look up something for me? My sister sent me down here to get a box of knickknacks for her, and, well, I've forgotten the unit number."

I could practically hear the pout in Benoit's voice as he leaned across the desk, but for once in his life his charm was falling flat.

Melvin was one hundred percent uninterested.

"Her name?"

Benoit gave a little harrumph, which made me smirk. It seemed our resident charmer was going to have to use the element of surprise this go around.

"Bérengère Olivier."

Seriously? Could he pick a harder name to—

"How you spell that?" Melvin turned toward the computer and suddenly it clicked, as Benoit slipped his hands into his pocket, no doubt palming the tranq he had hidden inside.

Hope he kept that thing capped in there.

"B-E—with a little accent over the top."

Melvin glanced over his shoulder at Benoit. "A what?"

"An accent. It's French. You press the command button at the same as—Would you like me to just come around and type it in?"

Melvin, the poor bastard, rolled his eyes but nodded, and as Benoit slipped in behind the desk and moved in behind him—

Thump.

—he was out before he even knew what hit him.

"*Merde*. He went down harder than I expected," Benoit muttered as his camera caught Melvin where he'd just face-planted into the desk.

Chuckles rumbled through the van, then Shep said into his mic, "Good work, Benny—we'll be there in a second."

"No need to hurry on his account. He's got enough of that drug in him to have him sleeping until tomorrow morning."

"Is it weird I've never found you sexier?" Dimitri asked.

"*Non, mon monstre*. It's kind of the same way I felt when you pulled a gun on me back in Venice."

"Masks on," King said, gruff and no-nonsense. The metal was cold on my skin as I pulled mine on, which actually felt good on my bruised face.

Each of us wore the same black filigreed style beneath black hoods, something King had been adamant on so that no one could distinguish between us in case we were seen doing things that weren't exactly legal.

Like breaking into a public storage facility.

Once we were ready, Alessio held up the camera jammer, hit the button, then counted to ten before pulling open the van door.

As we all piled out, I stopped behind Dimitri's seat and said, "You two are seriously fucked up, you know that, right?"

The interior light caught on the jagged scar that lined his cheek, and a wicked smirk curled his lips. "Bring him back safe or I'll fuck *you* up."

Yeah, Benoit's boyfriend was one terrifying motherfucker, all right. But now that I'd seen Shep in full alpha mode gunning down my enemy, I couldn't say I blamed him for being hot for his arms dealer.

We slipped inside quietly, Benoit tossing us the set of employee key cards as we passed.

"Way to win him over," I said, eyeing Melvin's body on the floor as Benoit lounged back in the guy's chair and shot me a glare.

"Obviously something's wrong with him, not me. *Je suis la perfection incarnée.*"

I snorted as I joined the others in the elevator, leaving Benoit to inspect his nails or whatever he did while we were on a mission. The man didn't enjoy getting his hands dirty, though he *was* killer at planting devices.

"Third floor," Alessio said, scanning one of the key cards. No one said a word as we climbed floors, the anticipation building with every second that passed by.

Would we finally get some answers? Or would this be a bust?

I wasn't sure what I wanted more.

No, that wasn't true. I wanted to know who was behind the blackmail, death threats, and kidnapping. But more than that, I wanted to know why this motherfucker—whoever it was—had targeted me.

I glanced at Shep standing beside me, his shoulders stiff and his hands clenched by his sides. He looked as tense as I felt. The adrenaline running through us all but vibrated in the air. When the elevator reached our floor, I brushed my hand over his, needing to ground myself in some way, and Shep turned to look at me.

The mask covered his handsome face, but that intense blue gaze locked and held mine in a way that made my breath catch.

“Ready?” he asked.

“Ready.”

He gave a clipped nod as our brothers filed out ahead of us then said, “Let’s go and infiltrate this fucker’s world.”

I followed him out of the elevator and we made our way down the hall past identical orange garage doors all locked and secure. We made a few turns, located the hall we needed, then we were there.

The six of us stood in front of the door for a second, each taking in the moment and wondering what we were going to find on the other side of the door.

Then Lachlan stepped forward with the bolt cutters.

I reached for Shep’s hand as Lachlan cut through the lock, and when he tossed it aside and went to haul the door up, I blurted out, “Wait.”

He froze, and everyone looked at me.

“Something wrong, Theo?” King said.

“*Non.* I just want to say thanks for doing this, no matter what we find in here.”

“You’re our brother,” Lucien said as though that was the beginning and end of everything, but it went deeper than that. The level of trust they’d had to give me, even when everything pointed to the fact I was a traitor, was something else.

Something I’d never forget.

“Thanks anyway.”

Lachlan looked between me and Lucien. “You two want to sing a round of ‘Kumbaya’ now, or we good to go?”

I flipped him off, then gestured to the unit.

Lachlan grabbed hold of the handle and hauled it up, and before he could even step aside, two words left my mouth.

“Holy. Shit.”

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12

SHEP

"JESUS CHRIST." MY breath left my body like I'd been sucker-punched as I stared wide-eyed at what was inside the storage unit.

This had been a long shot. I hadn't wanted to get my hopes up even though my gut had told me there was something here, and truth be told, this was a better lead than anything else we'd had, so why not check it out?

But this…

Holy shit. I hadn't expected *this*.

"What in the demented fuck?" Lachlan said, stepping into the space that wasn't more than ten feet by ten feet, roughly the size of a one-car garage. Fluorescent lights overhead flickered, one buzzing weakly like it was about to die.

It wasn't the computer setup against one wall—an already odd choice in a storage unit—that caught and held our attention. It wasn't even the several feet of rope wound neatly and hanging off the back of the chair that did it, though maybe that was just because Theo wasn't currently sitting in the chair.

No, the glaring issue was the way every single inch of space on the walls had been covered in photos, printouts, maps, and whiteboards that featured not just Theo's face…but all of us.

And most predominately? The large image in the center of the others, the one that had strings attached to each of us?

Tyrone Kingston.

All heads pivoted in our leader's direction, shock written across all my brothers' faces, the same I could feel on mine. King remained silent, his jaw tightly clenched as he stared at the photos. There were numbers marked on each of us, though they didn't seem to coordinate with seniority in the group, otherwise King would be number one.

No, that honor had gone to the man standing beside me, the one who could've been tied to the lone chair in the unit had I not found him in time. "1" was drawn over his body in red Sharpie.

At least, I thought it was Sharpie. Wouldn't put it past the fucker to be drawing in blood.

I swallowed hard and found myself reaching for Theo's hand again, needing to feel him to make sure he was really there. It was obvious he was the first target, but not the last. Not when all of us were marked, and that number two spot was clear as day and reserved…

For me.

I was next.

Theo's eyes met mine behind the mask, so many unspoken emotions in those blue depths. Worry, anger, determination, revenge. All the same things I was feeling too, though wrath was taking the lead at the moment with every fucked-up thing my gaze caught on.

Lucien let out a low whistle and brushed by me for a closer look, fingering one of the strings that led from King to his own picture, marked "5." "Clearly someone is a little obsessed."

"This isn't obsession," I snapped. "This is derangement."

"That too." Lucien traced the string back to King's picture. "Looks like he's saving you for last, King."

The low, menacing growl that emanated from our leader had goosebumps popping up along my skin. It was rare that any of us saw this side of him—he was perpetually the cool, calm, and collected one. Never one to fly off the handle. Usually weighed every decision carefully…

Though that hadn't been the case with Theo, had it?

King scanned the room, dark eyes quietly assessing before he issued one firm command: "Search it all."

Alessio headed straight for the computer, Lucien and Lachlan took video and photos of every inch of the space, while Theo and I broke into the locked filing cabinets. I let him take the lead on that, since I could feel the waves of restlessness rolling off him. He needed something physical to do,

and beating the drawers open with a hammer I hadn't even realized he brought was one way to get out all that energy. Too bad the fucker the unit belonged to hadn't been here, or we'd all be fighting over who got to tear into him.

Not a word was spoken as we all focused on our tasks, and with every breath the tension in the air grew more taut. My heart was beating an erratic rhythm that felt out of place with my usual composure. Maybe it was because this was personal. The person all this shit belonged to had tried to kill Theo. *My* Theo.

Metal scraped against metal as Theo yanked open the first drawer for me and then dropped to his knees to work on the bottom one. I grabbed the first file with gloved hands and flipped through it.

"Libertine members," I muttered, turning page after page of what seemed to be an unofficial membership roster. We never would've shared such a list with our members, so this had been cobbled together—and on our letterhead, no less. "We were right," I said, holding up the file. "This guy's a Libertine. He's got internal memos printed out and has every member in every club accounted for."

"And photos," Theo said, rising to his feet with his own stack of findings. "Of *everyone*. Not just the ones on the walls."

Pulse hammering, I switched files with Theo and flipped through the pictures, some of them glossy and crystal clear, some of them zoomed in and slightly grainy, but all of them candid—and without our knowledge. Theo at a gala smiling with me looking serious and just out of focus behind him. Lachlan talking to Lucien outside Libertine's discreet entrance. King exiting a black SUV somewhere outside of Manhattan. It went on and on.

"He's been watching us for *years*," Theo said.

King's voice cut through, cold and sharp. "This isn't just surveillance. It's an archive."

My blood ran cold as I found more envelopes, some torn, some sealed, but each marked with black ink featuring the names of every person in this room—*and* Benoit.

Alessio cursed as he opened a drawer beside him and picked up a hard drive. "Well, looky what we have here." He plugged it into the computer, and soon, lines of code began to scroll across the screen. "Encrypted," he muttered, his fingers flying over the keys. Several folders popped up on the screen, and he clicked on one. "Huh."

“What the hell does that mean?” Lachlan said. “What is all that?”

“Financial records… Timestamps from six years ago. This is one of our old shell accounts.”

King’s expression hardened. “No. That was scrubbed.”

“Apparently not. There’s a video file, too.”

Theo’s gaze snapped toward him and he abandoned his file. “Play it.”

The video flickered at first before settling on a dark-headed thirty-something man seated in front of a computer monitor. With the angle of the screen, it seemed the camera was one for security up in the top corner of the room. It didn’t seem to be recording somewhere important, not with the piles of papers littering the desk and not much else of note in the room. Maybe it was a home office? But why would a home office need a security camera?

The man’s voice was shaking slightly as he spoke urgently to whoever was on the other end of his cell phone.

“I think they’ve caught on,” he said, lowering the phone onto the desk. He tapped the button for speakerphone, leaving his hands free to type something into the computer.

The voice on the other end of the line sounded a lot like the man in the office, only slightly deeper. “They don’t know a thing. Trust me.”

“Then why can’t I access any of their accounts? They’ve all just fuckin’ disappeared.”

“You can find them again.”

“You’re not listening. The fact their shit’s been moved in the first place is a problem. You don’t move hundreds of mils without a reason.”

There was a deep sigh from the man on the line. “You’re being paranoid. These rich assholes probably take precautions like this all the time.”

“I don’t think so. I need—”

“To handle it. Or I will.”

“Who the fuck made you the boss?”

He snorted. “Eldest child privileges. Call me when it’s done.”

The call ended and the man in the video grumbled under his breath before slapping the phone off the table. He held his head in frustration for a long time before going back to typing on the computer, but a few seconds in, he whirled around in his chair suddenly to face the door.

Utter shock and terror were written all over his face as he scrambled to his feet, holding his hands up.

At first it was hard to tell what had him so frightened, but then a familiar figure stepped through the doorway, his gun aimed straight at him.

King.

I couldn't take my eyes off the screen as King stalked forward, pure vengeance radiating off every part of him. He looked scary as fuck, and I wondered what the hell this guy had done to provoke him.

"You can't be all that surprised," King said.

The man swallowed and moved away, tripping over his chair. "Th-the money—"

"It's not about the money. Siphoning from us is a shit thing to do, but it won't get you killed." King stepped in even closer, leaving nowhere for the man to go. "But you made a grave mistake. You threatened exposure, which, in turn, puts me at risk. Puts my men at risk. My entire organization."

The man's mouth opened and shut, like he wanted to fight that claim but couldn't.

"*No one* fucks with what's mine. And certainly not a two-bit hacker no one will miss." King aimed at the man's head and, without another word, pulled the trigger.

The video cut off then, and I immediately looked to King.

Who didn't look even a bit remorseful.

I didn't even know where to start with the questions I wanted to ask, something that seemed to be the general theme among the others as well.

"I'm not sorry," King said, his voice strong and clear. "He threatened to expose everything we've worked for. Everything we're doing."

"No one blames you for that." Lachlan was the first to speak up, clearly having no issue with taking out someone who posed a threat. "But—"

"Why is this the first we've heard about it?" I finished. If my tone sounded accusatory, it was because it was. It was one thing for King to withhold this from all of us. But six years ago also put the incident square in the we-were-together timeframe, which felt like another gut punch altogether. He hadn't confided in me about this. Not even in the privacy of our bed. What else had he been hiding? *Jesus.*

"It was a long time ago," was all King said, but that wasn't going to cut it.

“Someone was after us and you didn’t think it was important to clue us in?” Lucien said.

“We had a lot going on at the time. We were under a lot of stress. I *handled* it.”

“But you didn’t have to handle it alone,” I said. King’s eyes met mine, and I could see the tiniest flicker of regret before it passed completely. “We’re a team. We deal with whatever comes our way together.”

Lachlan scoffed. “Like the way you kept this shit with Theo to yourself until he almost got blown up? That sound like teamwork to you?”

I narrowed my eyes. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. Getting to the truth of the matter was more important than putting him on blast.”

“Again, something you kept to *yourself*.”

“That’s enough of the blame game,” Lucien said, holding out his hands as he stepped in between us. “Let’s get back to what’s happening here. Clearly this video has something to do with the threats we’re receiving now, but why? Is it revenge?”

“Uh, yeah,” Theo said. “No shit it’s revenge. Probably whoever was on the other end of that call, since they were working together.”

“He said ‘eldest child privileges,’” Alessio mused, drumming his fingers over the mousepad. “King killed his younger brother.”

All eyes again landed on King, who suddenly didn’t have a hell of a lot to say.

“You thought you took care of the problem,” I said slowly, trying to work it all out in my head. “But you didn’t know there was a second party involved.”

“Another hacker,” Alessio added. “Which makes sense with Theo’s videos.”

“Great. So this whole thing could’ve been avoided had King thought to do some due diligence.” Sarcasm dripped from Theo’s words, and I couldn’t blame him. All these years had gone by with King thinking he’d left this in the past, only for whoever this was to come back with a vengeance. Someone who’d infiltrated our club and had been slowly gathering information for the perfect time.

“We need to check the records,” I said. “We’re looking for anyone who’s joined Libertine in the last six years.”

“But what does this have to do with targeting Theo now?” Lucien said.

I shook my head and went over to the wall of photos branching off from King. “Not just Theo. He’s just the first on the list, judging by these numbers. My guess is, it’s because he’s the best known of the group, and that would be one way to blow the lid off our organization.”

“Which is why you’re labeled second. The world knows who you are too,” Alessio said, nodding. “That makes sense. King’s the final target after he’s gotten rid of us all.”

“Exactly. Destroy King by destroying everything he’s worked for and every one of us involved.”

“Seven eyes for an eye seems a little extreme, but I can’t say I wouldn’t do it.” Lachlan shrugged.

I couldn’t disagree with him there. I’d been ready to burn the world and everyone in it down to get to Theo. Offing seven people who, even inadvertently, had a hand in his brother’s death? I could understand the rage.

But no one was touching Theo *or* my brothers as long as I was still breathing.

“There’s got to be something here that gives us a clue as to his identity,” Lucien murmured almost to himself as he started going through the files Theo had opened.

“Alessio?” King asked.

“I’m copying everything on his computer to take back with me and creating a hidden gate, which will leave it open for me to access at the office.”

King nodded his approval. “And the ‘untraceable’ company front for the storage unit?”

“I’ll work on it.”

“And while you’ve got the rest of us busy with your orders, maybe you could work on looking up what ‘honesty and transparency’ means.” Theo hadn’t taken his eyes off King the entire time, and with his eyes practically slits and his arms crossed, I wondered if I should position myself in front of him. We didn’t need to watch another murder go down in this room. “Perhaps even remove the knife in my back while you’re at it.”

King slowly turned his head in Theo’s direction. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

King took in a deep breath and released it before answering. “You may not understand it, but I did what I had to do. What I’ll always do. You don’t

have to agree with my methods, but I protect what's mine—"

"Bullshit," Theo said, pushing past me before I could stop him. He moved in close to King, glaring daggers at him. "You dared to call *me* disloyal when you kept this from us for years? What else are you hiding, huh?"

When King didn't say anything right away, only crossed his arms, Theo started forward. Lachlan stepped in and pushed him back.

When Theo brushed his hand aside, Lachlan looked at me. "Shep? You gonna say something?"

"No, I think Theo's about covered it."

A smug smile curled Theo's lips while Lachlan's brows shot up.

Guess he didn't expect me to take Theo's side in all this, but fuck that. He was right, and King needed to own up to what he'd done.

But when Benoit's voice crackled through our earpieces, I knew that wouldn't be happening tonight. "You almost done up there, or do I need to dose this guy with more sleep juice?"

"We're wrapping it up," King boomed before any of us could answer.

"Now you speak." Theo shook his head, glaring at King. Then he headed back to where I stood, knocking into Lachlan's shoulder hard as he passed.

Alessio unplugged the hard drive he'd been copying the computer files from while Theo, Lucien, and I grabbed the remaining files.

Step one, complete. We'd actually found our first clues into this fucker, and it'd been more than a crumb this time.

As we filed out, I turned back around to look inside, my eyes catching again on the rope and chair, and felt bile rise in my throat.

How differently this could've turned out. I didn't feel confident we ever would've found Theo if they'd managed to take him this far.

Lucien slammed the door to the unit shut, and I hoped like hell I could banish the visual of what I'd just seen from my mind.

But for now, I just wanted to get as far away from it as I could.

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13

SHEP

"YOU KNOW WHAT pisses me off the most?" Theo said as he stormed out of the private elevator that led into my loft.

I'd known this moment was coming, that he'd eventually erupt. He'd been fuming the entire way home, festering in his anger, disappointment, and complete shock at what we'd uncovered back at the storage unit.

"I could take a guess—"

"It was *him*," he shouted. "This entire fucking fiasco is all because of him."

Him, of course, being King. Something *I* was still trying to wrap my brain around.

"All this time, all those accusations and doubts about *my* loyalty, was because he fucked up way back when."

Theo stormed through the wide living room and over to the bar cart by the wall of windows.

"And not only did he dare to question my loyalty, he had all of you questioning it too." He pulled the top off the whiskey decanter and flipped over a glass. "'Sure looks like you on the video, Theo,'" he said, mimicking King's baritone. "'Why did you take out your tracker if you've got nothing to hide? I'm going to send Shep to make sure you behave yourself.'"

He poured several fingers of amber liquid into the tumbler. "Well… Fuck. You."

To say Theo was angry, might just be the understatement of the century. In fact, I couldn't remember ever seeing him so worked up. Usually the most rebellious and outrageous of my brothers, Theo wasn't the type to spiral. But as he threw back the full glass of alcohol and reached for the decanter for a refill, I let him at it.

He'd been through it over the last month or so, and if anyone deserved to get blind drunk, it was him. But hopefully the food I'd ordered would get here before that happened. The last thing he probably wanted to do with sore ribs was spend the night hugging the porcelain throne.

"In all fairness, if he hadn't sent me to watch over you, we wouldn't be—"

"What? Fucking?" Theo turned to me, his glass again full. "Don't kid yourself, America. If I'd wanted to fuck you before that night, I would've."

I tried not to take offense at the barb, knowing his anger wasn't really directed at me. But that didn't mean it didn't sting. "Implying you didn't want to?"

Theo took a swig of his drink and shrugged. "Wasn't allowed to *want* to, remember? King's rules."

Oh yeah, Theo was feeling toxic tonight.

I was about to push for a more definitive answer when the intercom sounded. Dinner had arrived. "I've got to go get that, but we're not done here."

Theo rolled his eyes and turned his back on me. It was going to be a long night.

I headed down, picked up the Chinese food, and, after tipping the delivery man, took the elevator back up to my place. My mind was full of images from when we opened the storage unit to see all of our faces plastered on the wall with numbers like some kind of sick countdown to the main target—King.

I still couldn't believe he'd kept such a huge secret from us. Yes, what he'd done had been to ensure the safety of Libertine and its members. But by going off on his own, he'd done the number one thing we never did: left a loose end. One that was trying to eliminate us one by one.

It was a rookie mistake. One I was sure was eating King up tonight. But he was the least of my worries. No, actually, I was done worrying about his feelings. That was someone else's job now. Or *two* someones. My main

concern now was for the man currently propping up my wall with his hand as he stared out at the night sky.

Still drinking, Theo looked as if the window pane wasn't there he might just jump out, and I couldn't say I blamed him. He'd been through it lately. It seemed everywhere he turned there had been accusations, danger, stress, and all I wanted to give him now was safe harbor.

"Food's here." I walked over to the table in the living room and pulled out the small cartons. "Theo?"

"Don't want food."

I let out a sigh and scooped some beef lo mein onto a paper plate for him. It was his favorite, and after adding a couple of pork spring rolls I headed over to where he stood and placed it on the bar cart beside him. He needed to get some food in him or he was going to regret it.

"You need to eat, Theo."

"No, I need to drink." He held his glass up in a mock salute.

"That's not going to help."

"Really? Because right now it's doing a damn good job at making me feel…less."

"And that's what you want? To numb your feelings?"

"Better than remembering that my so-called friends and family were so quick to blame me for everything. That *you* did too."

I reached for his arm and turned him to face me. "Me?"

"*Oui*, you." Theo shrugged out of my hold, and that was almost worse than him taking a shot at me. "Back in Monaco. You thought I'd betrayed our brothers."

"No." I shook my head. "I didn't know *what* to think."

"And you think that's better?"

"I think there was a lot of evidence—"

"*Planted* evidence."

"—implicating you."

Theo's eyes narrowed. "You believed King."

"I did not," I said a little louder than expected. "I came to you. I asked *your* side of the story. I asked you why at every turn."

"And doubted me every step of the way."

It was clear that nothing I said tonight was going to get through to him. He was too angry, too far into the bottle, to talk with any sense. I could see

it in the stubborn set of his jaw, the irritated angle of his chin, the volatile emotions swirling in his eyes.

The best thing I could do was walk away.

I turned away from him, and as I walked back to the food, I felt something warm and wet hit my back.

No…

There is no way he just—

"What's the matter, America?"

I turned back to see the paper plate I'd given him on the floor at my feet. Half of the noodles all over the hardwood, and the other half…

"Did you just throw your fucking food at me?"

Theo ran his eyes down over me to the mess at my feet. "So what if I did?"

Oh, so that was how he wanted to play, was it? *Someone* had some aggression he wanted to get out, but he was a little too beat up to go a few rounds physically.

Well, two could play at that little game.

I bent and reached for the lo mein piled high on my plate, and felt a distinct sense of satisfaction when Theo's eyes widened a fraction.

Yeah, that's right. You're not the only one who can act a fool.

"There's no way you're going to throw that," he said, eyeing the long, thick noodles between my fingers.

"What makes you think that?"

Theo drained the rest of his drink as though he didn't have a handful of noodles with his name on it aimed his way. "Because you're Shepard O'Neil Winchester the third. Mr. Perf—"

He ducked, but was off by half a second, as slippery noodles caught his cheek before splattering on the window behind him.

Theo whipped his head around to stare at the saucy mess as it slid down the pane to the hardwood floor.

"I can't *believe* you just fucking did that."

Then he really wasn't going to believe what I did next. As he turned back to face me, a second handful was launched, and this time I got him square in the chest.

"*Putain! Tus es cinglé.*"

I knew the first half of that but not the second. But if I were a betting man, I'd think it was something like, *You're crazy*, judging by the shocked

look on Theo’s face.

“You seriously want to do this?”

“This?” I eyed him with no remorse. “Didn’t you *start* this?”

He came toward me, scraping the food off his shirt, and as I turned to look at the food on the table beside me, he lunged.

Theo’s palm met my cheek, noodles smooshing into skin and falling into my shirt, as I stumbled back a step. But I wasn’t going down without a fight, even if it was a food-based one.

I grabbed hold of his wrist and shoved him back a step, then, once I was free of him, grabbed up another fistful of food. I hurled it toward him, aiming for whatever I could hit, but when it landed in his hair, I couldn’t help my snort of laughter.

Well, would you look at that? It wasn’t every day you saw a member of the royal family with lo mein in his eyes.

Theo reached up and slowly swiped the noodles from his face, then growled.

“Lookin’ good there, Your Serene Highness.”

“You’re going to pay for that one.”

“Am I?”

“*Oui, et tu vas en chier.*”

Now *that* was definitely a threat, and the sound of it falling from Theo’s tongue was music to my ears—and so were the knuckles he cracked before he rushed me.

He bent at the waist, aiming for mine, and even with my feet braced, the impact had me jolting back and hitting the corner of the table, and before I could catch myself, the two of us tumbled and fell.

We hit the ground with a loud thump, my back cracking on the hardwood, my front cushioning his fall as the rest of the Chinese food fell to the floor under and around us in a sticky mess.

I cursed as the breath whooshed out of me, but if I thought Theo was done, I was in for a rude awakening. He shoved up until he was straddling my thighs, then that scheming fucker grabbed an egg roll off the table and turned back toward me, aiming for my mouth.

The second I realized what he was planning, I clamped my lips shut and the fried flour shell smashed into my mouth.

“Eat it, *fucker*,” Theo growled, his eyes dancing with glee and mischief as he made a total mess of my face. It wasn’t until I grabbed hold of his

hands and rolled him to his back that he let out a grunt of surprise.

But he wasn't giving up without a fight. He twisted his legs around mine and then shoved me with all his might until I was once again beneath him.

"Shit." I always forgot what a cunning fighter he was, but as sauce seeped through the material of my shirt and I stared up into Theo's wild eyes, I didn't care that he'd one-upped me. Because instead of the stern, angry line that had been stretched across his lips all night, a wide smile had finally appeared. "You're fucking unhinged."

"Well," Theo said, his breathing coming in heavy, hard pants, "you already knew that."

"This doesn't mean you won," I said as he reached down and picked several of the long strands of noodle from my shirt.

"*Non?* Sure looks like it from where I'm sitting."

I stared at the food dangling between his fingers. "What? No one's ever thrown noodles at the Prince of Monaco before?"

"Can't say they have." Theo tossed it aside, then leaned down and licked a path up my cheek to say by my ear, "But I'm glad you were my first."

I let out a relieved sigh then started to laugh, the tension between us finally defused, as we lay there on my living room floor surrounded by our dinner.

"A food fight, huh?" Theo said as he stared down at me, and I leaned up to take his lips with mine in a fast kiss. "I didn't think Shepard O'Neil Winchester the third was the type to play with his food."

"Maybe I just hadn't found the right person to play with."

"Oh *really*? So for next time—"

"Next time?"

"Mhmm. Next time maybe I should play a little…gentler."

"If you mean maybe paint on me with ice cream or something, instead of throwing it at my back in a temper tantrum, then yes."

"A temper tantrum?"

I looked around at the mess all over the floor and window, then nodded. "Of epic proportions. But you deserved to have it. I don't know how I'd be dealing with all of this if I were in your position."

"Let's just say I'm not about to let King off the hook with a few well-thrown egg rolls to the head. He has a lot of explaining to do."

“And a lot of apologizing,” I added.

“That too.” Theo ran his tongue along my lower lip then waggled his brows. “Sticky.”

I shook my head and groaned. “Yeah, I am. All over and not in a good way.”

“Well, how about we go and take care of that?”

“Shower?” Now that sounded like heaven.

“Shower,” Theo agreed, already unbuttoning his shirt as we headed across the living room as though there wasn’t food over half of it.

That could wait. My man couldn’t.

It was time to wash tonight’s stain the hell off of us.

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14

THEO

I DIDN'T KNOW how he'd done it, but somehow Shep managed to pull me out of the shit-tastic mood I'd been in since discovering the truth behind all the veiled attempts on my character and life.

I mean, really, I hardly needed help ruining my own reputation, or risking my life. But the fact that some asshole had targeted me because of King's transgressions had really stuck in my craw. Especially since our leader had been so quick to believe all the things that had been said.

That was an argument for another day, though. Another day and another man, really. It wasn't fair to direct my anger at Shep. He wasn't the one who deserved it. And while I'd gotten some of my initial rage out at King back at the storage unit, we weren't done there. I still had so many questions. And he needed to start giving me some fucking answers I could live with, because how in the hell was I ever supposed to trust him again?

I wasn't going to think about that now, though. Not when I had Shep following me into his bathroom and my blood was still pumping from our impromptu food fight.

I smiled at the image of Shep's stunned face when that first throw had hit him square in the back. I'd for sure thought he was going to go ballistic, but once again Shepard Winchester shocked the hell out of me.

That gorgeous bastard had picked up a handful of noodles and thrown it right back. He'd known exactly what I needed and given it to me. Something I was hoping he'd do again, right now.

I balled up my shirt and tossed it in the corner of the bathroom, and as I reached for the button of my pants, Shep strode in shirtless and my hands froze in place.

Damn, but my man was fine. That chiseled jawline, the stubble lining it. The small earring in his left ear that caught under the light at times, reminding me that there was a hidden rebellious side under all those immaculate suits he dressed in.

Then there was that body.

As he moved in behind me and my view of all those ridged muscles vanished, I turned, not to be denied.

I hooked my fingers into the waistband of his pants and drew him forward, angling my head so I could scrape my teeth along that strong jaw I'd just been admiring.

"You're so damn sexy," I said as I nipped my way up to his ear. "Even covered in lo mein sauce."

Shep chuckled and moved forward a step until my ass was pressed up against the bathroom counter. "And whose fault is that?"

"Mine. One hundred percent." I flicked open the button of his pants and grinned. "But I'm not about to apologize. Not when you're standing in front of me half naked."

Shep turned his head and brushed his lips over the top of mine. "How about you get me *fully* naked?"

"You read my mind."

He grinned and flicked his tongue out to tease open my lips, as I slipped my hand inside his open pants. My man was already hard, like the fight had done more than just defuse my frustration—it'd turned us both on.

I wrapped my fingers around his cock, loving the way he felt in my hand. God, I also fucking loved the way he kissed. That talented tongue swept inside my mouth to tangle with mine, and I moaned around him.

"Shower?" I murmured against his lips as I dragged my fingers up the underside of his dick.

"Unless you plan to lick me clean."

Now *that* sounded like a good time.

Immediately I pulled back from his mouth and licked a path along his neck, tasting the remnants of sauce there. "You taste delicious."

Shep let out a laugh and backed away, shaking his head. He turned the shower on and then, with his eyes on me, shoved off his pants. That

gorgeous dick sprang free, and like a fucking magnet, it drew me closer.

I started toward him, and Shep's gaze traveled down to where I still had my unbuttoned pants hanging off my hips.

"Take them off," he said, quietly but demanding.

His command had the energy changing from a fun, sexy tease to something so electric I could feel the charge in the air between us.

As the hot water began to steam up the room, I got rid of my pants, kicking them off to join my shirt. If Shep was bothered by the bruises and cuts still marring my body, he didn't show it. No, his eyes openly sparked with arousal as he held his hand out to me and drew me into the shower with him.

I flinched as the hot water hit the tender skin at my wrists and forearm, but it only stung for a second. And truth be told, it had nothing on the overriding need to get closer to Shep. The way the water sluiced down his body, trailing the ridges of muscle, had me licking my lips, because he was mouthwatering.

Mouthwatering and all *mine*.

"I want you." The words slipped off my tongue without a conscious thought, but it was only half the truth. I didn't just want Shep, I found myself *needing* him, and I never needed anyone.

He captured my lips in a hungry kiss, strong hands moving to my ass, holding me pressed up against his body as he kneaded the muscles. I sucked on his tongue, relishing the friction from our cocks rubbing, but needing so much more. Needing all of him.

"And I want you," Shep said against my lips, "to take me."

Lust shot straight through my dick and kicked against his, eliciting a sexy chuckle from Shep.

"I take it you want that?" He squeezed my ass, and then I felt his fingers trail down the shadowy cleft and shivered.

Shep knew. He always just knew exactly what I needed, even when I didn't realize it myself. But he was offering me this, a way to relieve myself of the events of tonight, and it only made me love him even more.

Wait. No. Not love. Just a seriously intense *liking* situation.

"Take it all out on me," he said, trailing his lips down my jaw to nibble along the lobe of my ear. "Whatever you're feeling… I can handle it. I want it." He bit down harder on my lobe, and fuck, it was hard not to come right then and there.

“Bordel, tu es tellement sexy.”

“That better mean ‘bend the fuck over, Shep.’”

I grinned, feeling that mischievous pull again and said, *“Putain, penche-toi en avant, Shep.”*

His blue eyes darkened and his mouth tipped up. Then he turned away from me, placed his hands on the wall, and bent at the waist, presenting that plump, gorgeous ass for the taking.

The water slid down his body in ways that should be illegal, dipping into every hidden crevice it could find, and for a moment I just stood there imagining it was my tongue. He really was something to look at—something fucking magnificent.

“Hope you’re not looking for slow and tender.”

Shep chuckled and shoved back into my hands. “Pretty sure your crash-tackling me to my living room floor dispelled any doubt of that happening.”

Unable to resist him any longer, I reached for the bottle of lube Shep had on the small alcove and squeezed some into my hand, then turned back and moved in behind him. I gripped one of his perfect cheeks and spread him wide, and then slowly stroked my fingers up and down the warm strip of his ass.

Shep shuddered at the feel of two of my fingers teasing and probing his hole, then he shoved his hips backward, clearly as impatient as I was for this reconnection.

It’d been a few days since we’d been with each other fully. He’d been too concerned over my injuries and, if I were being honest, I’d been too sore. But as my fingers now disappeared inside his spectacular body, any injuries I’d sustained recently were a distant memory. One I now wanted to replace with something much more pleasurable.

A low groan rumbled out of Shep as I scissored my fingers inside of him. When he glanced back over his shoulder, his wet hair glistening and his eyes dark with lust, I knew he was done with the foreplay.

Thank God for that.

I removed my fingers and stroked my palm down his spine to rest it just above his tailbone. “Spread your legs a little more,” I said in a gruff voice. Shep parted those strong thighs, his waiting hole beckoning me closer.

I gripped my cock, lined it up with his eager entrance, and slid home.

Home…

Oui, that was exactly what Shep represented to me now. A sexy safe haven for me to always come to—and inside of—whenever I needed him.

The thought made my pulse quicken as my toes curled into the marble floor of his shower with pleasure. The sheer intensity of the feelings I was experiencing morphed into an intoxicating sensation, and I dug my fingers into his hips for stronger purchase.

Shep grunted with every hard thrust I gave him, "handling" me just as he said he would, and something about that made him even hotter.

To the outside world, Shep was always in control, *always* so put together. But behind closed doors, when he was tucked away with me, the real Shep came out to play—whether that be with a food fight, saving me from a hitman, or standing up to King for me. I was starting to discover I liked just about every part of him—including his phenomenal ass.

"Fuck, Theo."

The sound of my name had me looking down at where my dick was lodged in deep, and I realized just how hard I'd been going at him. But that was bound to happen when I started reminiscing over all the reasons I'd fallen head over heels for the guy.

"Your own fault," I grunted, as I pulled out and tunneled back in again. "Your ass is perfect."

Shep growled a feral sound at the penetration, then dropped his head and reached for his cock. He was getting close, I could feel it in the way his body was contracting around mine and the frantic way he was working his dick.

The water was falling down over us in a warm spray, keeping us slippery and wet, and when I entered his body this time, I slid one of my hands up to his shoulders and pulled him upright.

Shep straightened off the wall with a grunt, his back meeting my front as my cock bottomed out deep inside him. The water hit his chest as I reached down and covered his hand with my own, and as I pulled out of his body then drilled back inside of him, I sank my teeth deep into his shoulder.

Shep shouted at the sting of pain with his pleasure, punching forward into our joined fists, and I followed, not about to give up my warm hole for anything. He repeated the move several times over, fucking forward through our fists then back onto my greedy cock. Then I licked my way up his neck until my mouth was by his ear.

“Come for me, Shep. I want to catch you when you fall apart, just like you caught me.”

He groaned and turned his head to capture my lips in a brutal kiss, then he pulled back and fucked his way into a toe-curling orgasm that echoed off the walls and down my spine. His pleasure was so intense it made my balls tingle and tighten, as his cum exploded on the shower wall and I detonated inside of him with the same kind of force.

My chest heaved against his back as I stood there, arms wrapped around him, as intimately connected as we could be, everything we’d been holding back these last few days finally coming to a head in a mutual understanding that with one wrong move, we could’ve lost one another. We might’ve been robbed of this very moment and all the ones to come, and all because of circumstances outside of our control.

I’d never felt such a soul-deep connection with someone. Not like this.

Somewhere during this crazy whirlwind, Shep had gone from my *what if?* to my *I’d die for you*, and when I finally pulled out of him, and he turned to wrap me in *his* arms, I knew he felt the exact same way.

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SHEP

I SHOULD'VE KNOWN Theo wasn't going to let King off so easily. Outwardly, he was back to his usual self, sarcastic and amusing as ever. Beneath the surface, though, his resentment had been building, because when a couple of days had passed without a word or even an apology from our leader, Theo finally exploded.

I didn't understand the litany of French coming off his tongue, other than they had to be creative curses, since I usually caught the gist.

"Not even an 'I'm sorry I was a dick who didn't give a shit you almost died in a jungle even though it was all my fault.' Unbelievable."

As he shoved his shoes on, I scrubbed a hand over my face, clearly having missed something while I was working out. "What happened?"

Theo stood from the chair in the corner of my room and scoffed. "Nothing. *Nothing* happened. That's the fucking problem." He grabbed his jacket and stormed toward the elevator like a man on a mission—but it looked like one that would have a shitload of consequences.

"Wait, stop," I said, blocking the door. "Talk to me."

"It's not *you* I need to talk to."

"So you're going where, exactly?"

"To King's."

I arched a brow. "Really."

"Yes, really. Don't give me that look."

"What look?"

His blue eyes narrowed and he poked a finger at my chest. “That one. Like you’re going to try to stop me from making a bad decision, blah blah blah. Unless you want noodle fight 2.0, you’ll let me by. And you *won’t* call King to give him a heads-up.”

A fired-up Theo was hot as hell, and I couldn’t stop my smirk. I moved aside to let him pass, and as he brushed by me, I caught him by the hand and pulled him back to me.

“I’m not your keeper, Theo,” I murmured against his soft lips as he struggled in my hold. “I’m your man. And you’re my priority over everyone. So if you want to confront King, I won’t stop you. I’ll even go with you.”

Incredulity flashed in his eyes as he stopped fighting me. “Really?”

“Why does that surprise you?”

“I…” He swallowed and looked away. “I guess I just assumed you’d think it was a bad idea.”

“Actually, I think clearing the air is probably the best thing to do, and it doesn’t look like King’s making the first move.”

Theo stared at me for a long moment like he expected me to change my mind, but then a huge grin broke out on his face and he gave me a long kiss.

“You better get dressed, then, Winchester,” he said, smacking me on the ass. “Otherwise all this pent-up frustration’s gonna be taken out on you.”

“I mean—”

“Get dressed.”

I stepped away from the door. “Never thought there’d come a day you wanted something more than sex.”

“Why do you think I’m so frustrated?” he called out as I headed back to the bedroom. “I’d much rather spend my time thinking about all the things I’m going to do to you than King.”

“I’d rather that too,” I said, and could practically hear the shudder in his voice as I pulled on a pair of jeans and a hoodie. Then I headed back out to see him sitting on the edge of the couch and offered my hand. “So let’s go.”

KING’S PLACE WAS unique, to say the least. It was also one of the most secure in Manhattan. So secure you wouldn’t even realize the nondescript garage door we’d just pulled up to opened up to a state-of-the-art elevator we would *drive* inside of to be delivered to the floor of his penthouse.

That’s right, not only did King have a garage in New York City, he had one that was an elevator with two spaces. You know, just in case he had a guest—or an angry Libertine member.

As I drove up to the door, I reached for the button on the intercom and waited to see who it was I was going to have to deal with. I had a one-out-of-three shot of getting the man himself, but if he wasn’t available I was hoping for—

“Hello?”

—Zac. Thank fuck. I would take him over East any day.

“Hey, Zac, it’s Shep and Theo. Is King home?”

“Yeah, we’re all here.”

It took everything I had not to groan at that, but Theo wasn’t quite as polite about it.

“Great, that’s just what we fucking need. King’s harem.”

“Theo,” I gritted out, and turned back to the speaker. “Could you let him know we’re here? That we need to talk?”

“Of course. Let me buzz you in.”

“Appreciate it,” I said as the garage door opened and I drove us inside. I parked and turned to see Theo staring out the windshield like he was expecting King to suddenly appear in a sneak attack.

He was on edge. I could feel the tension radiating off him, see it in the rigid set of his body. When I reached over to cover his hand with mine, he practically jumped through the roof.

“Hey, we don’t have to do this if you don’t want to.”

Theo shook his head. “*Non*, I’m fine. You just caught me off guard. That’s all.”

“Are you sure?”

“*Oui*. I’m just trying to remind myself not to…”

“Lose your shit?”

Theo snorted and raised a brow. “I was going to say ‘kick his ass in front of his little boyfriends,’ but sure, ‘lose my shit’ works too.”

“You know”—I leaned over the car console until my lips were a whisper above his—“if Zac and East weren’t up there, I might pay good money to see you kick his ass.”

Theo’s lips curved under mine, right before he nipped at my lower lip. “And you think *I’m* unhinged.”

“You are, and that’s why I’d want to see it.”

Theo chuckled and shoved me back to my side of the car, right before the elevator came to a stop. “Well, hate to break it to you, but Twiddlesweet and Twiddlebrat *are* here.”

“I know.” I frowned, and looked at the door that led inside of the penthouse. “And that’s the only reason I won’t allow you to beat him up. I don’t want to be left alone with them.”

“Well, well, well.” Twiddlebrat—better known as East—leaned against the door that led inside King’s penthouse. With a smirk on his lips, he assessed the two of us as we got out of the car and approached.

If I didn’t personally know what a shit East was, maybe I could see his appeal. If you were into twenty-somethings with a smartassed mouth and a god complex, which I wasn’t.

Then again, some could argue that the man beside me wasn’t all that far off from earning a similar title.

“What’s so important it has you two interrupting brunch?” East said, still blocking the door.

Not a smart move, considering my guy’s mood.

“None of your fucking business,” Theo said. “Go run and tell your nanny he’s got visitors.”

East’s eyes narrowed and he straightened, ready to give more attitude, but a hand clamped over his mouth from behind him and Zac gave us an apologetic smile.

“He’s a menace before he eats,” he said, pulling East aside so we could enter.

Zac had a few years on Twiddlebrat and seemed a hell of a lot more levelheaded, but the fact that he and King both not only put up with East but enjoyed him had me questioning their sanity. And mine. Because how the fuck did King go from what we had to…this?

I didn’t understand, and didn’t care to at this point.

“Where is he?” Theo said, getting straight to it.

Zac nodded to the right, still keeping a hold on East’s mouth. “He’s in the kitchen.”

“Thanks.” I started forward, following Theo, but then he turned around suddenly.

“I want to talk to him privately first.”

It wasn’t what I’d been expecting him to say, and I blinked in confusion. “Why?”

“Because you add another layer to the conversation that complicates things, and I want to say my piece.”

Normally that wouldn’t bother me at all, mostly because I understood Theo’s feelings about what went down.

But…

I side-eyed the two watching us nearby, not wanting to get stuck babysitting while Theo and King went at it.

Theo seemed to catch my drift, because a hint of a smile lifted his mouth and that damn mischievous look in his eyes made me want to groan.

“You two don’t mind entertaining Shep while King and I chat, do you?” he said, syrupy sweet. “Maybe you can show him your new toy collection?”

There went Zac’s hand, clamping over East’s mouth again. “Actually, I’ve got to run, but I’m sure East will be happy to show off the cravats he picked up when we were in Italy.” Then he frowned. “On second thought, maybe having access to something you can strangle him with isn’t the best idea.”

East rolled his eyes as Zac kissed him on the cheek and let go.

“Try to behave,” he said as he grabbed his keys and headed toward the door. I didn’t know whether he was talking then to East or to me…or maybe it was Theo, who had a brow raised in my direction, waiting for my answer.

I tried not to curse my life and how much I’d rather be in the room with Theo and King throwing down than have to wait here with one of King’s boytoys. But Jesus fucking Christ, really?

“Go,” I said, forcing a smile. “Let me know when you need me.”

Theo’s eyes softened a little and he leaned in, kissing me softly. “Don’t worry.” He winked and strode off toward the kitchen, leaving me to watch him go.

The fact that he thought I was more stressed about his confronting King was cute, but also told me he hadn’t spent enough time in the same room with Twiddleshit. Or Twiddlebrat. Both worked equally well.

Although maybe if I hadn’t had East as a distraction, I *would’ve* been more worried about what was happening in the other room, because Theo had been riled up to high hell earlier, and I had a feeling that rage would come back with a vengeance the second he saw King again. Maybe I’d casually move closer so I could at least listen in case I needed to intervene.

No. Theo could handle this. I didn’t need to insert myself, even though my instinct to defend and protect him thrummed through my body so

strongly it was almost physically impossible not to go to him.

East stalked forward as we were left alone in the vast living room. “Isn’t it a little incestuous to fuck your brother? That kind of thing is usually looked down on.”

Don’t let him get to you. Don’t let him get to you, I played on repeat in my mind. Because if there was one thing I knew about East, it was that he got off on riling his rivals, and I wasn’t about to give this little shit any satisfaction.

Instead, I employed every ounce of control I had, cocked my head, and measured him with a much cooler eye than he could ever hope to possess.

“Interesting point of view coming from someone who is friends with two *actual* brothers—by marriage—who are fucking. Tell me, do you voice your disapproval around them too, or is this merely a pathetic ploy to get under my skin?”

East snorted. “Please, I don’t want to have anything to do with your skin.”

“Yet you’re still currently close enough to make it crawl.” I brushed by him and headed over to the bar I knew King kept fully stocked in the mid-century bureau by the wall. I needed something to drink, and I didn’t give a fuck it wasn’t even noon.

“Sure,” East drawled. “Help yourself.”

After putting the glass stopper back in the decanter, I turned to see him eyeing me from where I’d left him standing on the other side of the room, and for the first time since King had hooked up with him, I allowed myself a second to really *look* at East.

I guessed he was handsome, if you didn’t know him in any way. He definitely knew how to dress. Loafers that looked reptilian in nature, light-colored slacks that fit him to perfection, and the silk shirt that flowed around him only added to the relaxed way he effortlessly fit into King’s luxurious home.

Bet this little fucker would throw a fit if someone threw noodles at him. The thought made me smile.

“Don’t mind if I do,” I finally said, then took a sip of the whiskey. “Since I bought the decanter set.”

East’s eyes widened, and the fact he didn’t know that made me feel pretty fucking good.

Yeah, swallow that, you pompous little dick.

Like water off a duck's back, East shrugged the comment away, arrogant enough to recover from the insult with surprising nonchalance. Or maybe he was so used to being handed his ass that it was like any other conversation.

"So let me see if I can piece together what's going on here," he said, strolling across the room toward me. "Prince Psycho in there wanted to talk with King about everything that went down recently, but is too much of a pussy to do it on his own, so he asked his big, strong boyfriend to come protect him."

The balls on this guy…

My fingers clenched around my glass so tight I was shocked it didn't shatter in my hand.

"No?" East said when I didn't immediately respond. But it wasn't that I didn't have a response in mind—it was more that I knew how mad King would be if I killed one of his boyfriends. "Okay, so *maybe* it's that you wanted to come here with Theo to snoop around your old place and see what you were…passed over for. I could see that."

Okay, that was fucking *it*.

I threw the glass onto the expensive rug covering King's wooden floors, then stalked forward until I was toe to toe with East.

"You're gonna to wanna get out of my face, little prince," I growled, and the fact he had to angle his head up to meet my stare made a punch of adrenaline rush through me.

"Little, huh? Apparently I'm big enough for *your* King."

I could hear the blood rushing around my ears as it boiled to an all-time fury, the red haze clouding my vision so close to exploding I could feel the heat flushing my face.

Then he smirked.

I reached out, grabbed hold of East's silk shirt, twisted it in my fist, and hauled him forward until our noses all but touched.

"What are you gonna do next, Mr. Winchester? Punch me?"

I wanted to. Christ, I wanted to. But as my name echoed around the vast room I'd once shared with King, I realized what I was doing. What I was *close* to doing. I was giving East exactly what he wanted. He'd riled me up, and I'd be damned if I let this little shit get to me. Not when there was something and some*one* far more important than him counting on me in the other room.

With Theo's face in mind, I let go of East's shirt and shoved him away from me.

"This isn't about you or me or even King. It's about Theo and what he went through."

East shook his head, disbelief entering his eyes. "Are you really that stupid? Has your dick made you blind—"

"Watch it, kid."

"—to how torn up King is over this?" East's brow furrowed, his own concern now slipping past the pompous bravado he'd been exuding from the moment we arrived. "He's not sleeping, barely eating, and instead of being his second-in-command, you've fucked off and decided to pick *me* over *we*."

It was no secret that I didn't put much stock in anything East had to say, but this time his words drew me up short, and so did his tone.

Libertine was like an extended family of sorts. That was why it worked. We had the utmost faith in one another, trusted each other implicitly. But there was no denying the fractures that had formed over the last month, making it feel as though I'd needed to pick sides—to pick my man over my leader.

East was right, though it pained me to admit it. I'd been so caught up in my new role as lover, boyfriend, and protector that I hadn't stopped to think about how what had happened was affecting everyone else.

Theo might've been *my* everything, but he was also their brother and King's responsibility. He was an integral part of Libertine, losing him would've gutted our organization, and the weight of *that* realization would be weighing most heavily on the one who had, for one second, let his feelings cloud his usually impeccable judgment.

Maybe if I'd taken the time to call King, to talk to him about my changing relationship with Theo, he wouldn't have made such an impulsive move. One I knew he was still beating himself up over.

Then add to that the discovery at the warehouse and…

Yeah, East was right, goddamn it.

I'd been so caught up in my *own* world, my *own* anger, worry, and frustration, that for the first time since joining Libertine, since becoming second-in-command, I *had* picked *me* over *we*, and that wasn't how a leader acted.

“Just because you aren’t together anymore”—East’s voice floated through the air and brought me back to the present—“doesn’t mean he doesn’t care about you or…miss you, I guess.”

I glanced at where East was doing his best to appear unaffected as he straightened his silk shirt.

“He tell you that?”

East’s eyes met mine and narrowed slightly. “He doesn’t have to. I could feel it. So could Zac. Just because you have someone new in your life, doesn’t mean you have to pull away from the old. He’s your brother, your King, is he not?”

Jesus Christ, it was a sad day when I was getting handed my ass by James fucking Easton.

Seemed that today *I* was Twiddledum.

“He is. And it’s about time I go find and remind him.”

I started forward, about to go and look for Theo and King, when East stepped into my path.

“Don’t get *too* friendly,” he said, running his eyes down over me. “I’m being amiable for King’s sake. You get too close to him, I’ll cut off your fucking balls.”

And that, right there, was *exactly* what King saw in East.

He might’ve been young; he might’ve been a brat. But he was a ballsy motherfucker, and he would fight for his man.

I liked that for King. It made me…happy.

And with that thought in mind, I smirked and leaned down to say by East’s ear, “I’d like to see you try, *little* prince.”

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THEO

KING DIDN'T LOOK up as I strolled into the kitchen. He sat at the long table quietly, cutting into his omelet, not looking at all ready for what I was about to throw at him.

What had Shep said on the way over? Try to stay calm so I wouldn't immediately put King on the defensive and actually make some headway.

Obviously that went against every instinct I had, because going over there and throttling him was what my brain was telling me to do.

That wouldn't solve anything…*but* it would make me feel better.

I took a deep breath to bank my rage and stopped in front of the table. "We need to talk."

King lifted his steaming mug of coffee to his lips and took a long sip.

It was infuriating the way he took his time with things when it suited him, and I was about ready to say fuck having patience when he finally nodded.

"We do. Why don't you take a seat, Theo." He gestured to the one across from him, but I ignored it.

"I'm fine right here."

"Suit yourself."

I scoffed. "Yeah. Yeah, I will *suit myself*, and I don't need your fucking permission to do it."

King sat back in his chair and didn't say another word, just cocked his head like he was giving me space to let it all out.

I didn't need his goddamn permission for that either.

I stepped forward, my thighs hitting the table as I towered over him where he sat. “You know, the first thing you should’ve said when I walked in here was ‘I’m sorry.’ You should be begging for my forgiveness for being such an obstinate shit. I’ve had your back for years, Tyrone. And I thought you had mine.”

“I do—”

“You didn’t. Not when it mattered. You should’ve known that video of me blowing up a building was fake the second you saw it. You know me. You know my character. You *chose* me, so you know I’m not that fucking stupid.” I swallowed, my emotions hitting me harder than I’d expected now that I was here voicing it all out loud. “Tell me why you were so quick to believe something so fucked. I need to know.”

King shook his head. “It wasn’t about you. It was about looking at the situation logically—”

“Bull*shit*. Logic would mean believing one of your own. Believing *me*.”

“You weren’t exactly forthcoming about being in Istanbul in the first place, were you? Perhaps you’ve forgotten you removed your tracker and broke our trust by doing so.”

I stopped short, remembering that little detail, but then brushed it aside. “Yeah, I did that. I own up to it. That’s the difference between you and me. I apologized. I don’t even know if you understand the meaning of the word.”

“What is it you want an apology for, Theo?” he said, leaning forward, elbows on the table. “For not blindly believing your reckless behavior could’ve caused you to make a rash decision in Istanbul? Or for walking in on you and Shep hiding your relationship? One that shouldn’t be happening under our rules in the first place?”

Putain. There it was—the unfiltered rage. It was back, pumping through my veins so hard I thought smoke was going to come out of my ears. I felt my nails dig into my palms as my fists clenched tight, and before I knew it, I swept my arm across the table, sending all the dishes crashing to the floor.

King flinched, not something I’d ever seen him do, and then I leaned over the table, in his face.

“You wanna talk about Shep, let’s talk about Shep,” I said, ignoring the footsteps I could hear somewhere behind me. “How about we start with the fact that I’m better for him than you could ever be? I’d never hide someone so fucking amazing, and I’d sure as hell never throw him away like you did. He deserves better, and you know what? I am.”

Finally, something that looked like guilt crossed his face, and he ran his hand over his jaw before nodding.

"You're right," he said, so quietly I almost missed it.

"Excuse me?"

He looked up. "I said you're right."

I hadn't expected him to agree, and it threw me off balance, especially when his gaze traveled behind me. I turned around to where Shep and East stood at the entrance, like the crash had made them come running.

King got to his feet, addressing Shep. "I fucked up with you, and you deserved better. You *deserve* better."

Shep's shoulders squared, looking like a pillar of strength and resilience—and also just so damn handsome—and he nodded once.

"Yes," he said, before his gaze shifted to me. "I do."

King's eyes then moved back to me. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry for doubting you, sorry for the way I reacted when I found out about you and Shep, and most of all, I'm sorry I led the danger right to you. There's no excuse."

Non, there wasn't. But… "At least it proved one thing."

"And that is?"

"You're human. I'd always had my suspicions."

"That's still no excuse," King said as he moved around the table, stepping over the eggs that were now splattered all over the floor.

Seemed I was getting really good at solving my arguments with food these days. I supposed it was better than my fists. Even if it wasn't half as satisfying—because there was no way King and I were ending our fight the same way Shep and I had.

King stopped in front of me, his dark eyes full of regret.

"I've never doubted my actions more than I have over this last month. Never been more disappointed in myself as a leader, brother…friend." He glanced past me to where Shep and East silently stood. "I thought the best way to end things with Shep was to make a clean cut. I thought it would be better for him, the organization, all of us." King's eyes came back to mine, and he shook his head. "But all it did was leave things unresolved."

"If you don't mind," East said, "I'm going to leave for this little walk down memory lane."

"East?" King's voice was soft but commanding. "I love you."

"I know. I love you too. Now fix this, so I never have to hear about it again."

Ballsy little shit. It wasn't every day you heard someone order King around. But it made sense he'd go for someone mouthy. He liked being the leader, the top dog, and Lord knew there was no one who needed topping more than East.

The door shut, and I looked back to see Shep walking toward us. When he took my hand in his, lacing our fingers, King glanced down at the union and nodded.

"Something so simple," he said so quietly I almost missed it. "A kiss on the cheek, hands being held in public." He looked from me to Shep, and gave a sad smile. "I couldn't give you that. *Didn't* give you that, and no one deserves it more. Realizing that was a harder pill to swallow than I expected. I'd never really allowed myself to think about how it would feel to watch you fall for someone else. Someone I know…" King turned to me, a look of remorse on his serious face. "I didn't handle it well."

"*Non*, you didn't."

"And you're right. You are good for him. You're good for each other. I should've seen that…"

He turned away from us then, moving back to the table, bracing his hands on top of it, and staring down at the wood grain. I knew King well enough to know he wasn't done yet, and when Shep's fingers tightened around mine, I could tell he sensed it too.

There was more here, more contributing to the stiff shoulders we were staring at than our involvement, and a second later King lifted a hand and slammed a fist down on top of the table, making the remaining dinnerware vibrate where it sat.

"I was *fucking* careless," he spat out, his chest heaving with self-disgust. "I was fucking careless and it almost got you killed."

King spun around then, his eyes full of remorse, his expression dour. I barely recognized him as he slumped back into a chair.

"You're right to question me, to doubt my leadership. This is all happening—all *happened*—because of me, because of my choices. And you, Theo—you almost died. I can't ever forgive myself for that, so how the hell could I possibly ask you to?"

Well, shit. How was I supposed to stay mad at that?

I'd come over here guns blazing, wanting King to answer for all his transgressions, wanting exactly this moment. But as I stood there with Shep

by my side, his hand in mine, with King looking so dejected, all I felt was empathy.

I'd been so focused on myself and how I was feeling and what I'd gone through that I hadn't taken a moment to think how King would be feeling.

Neither had Shep, apparently.

"We can forgive you because people make mistakes," Shep said, making more sense than I could of my thoughts. "Even you, Ty."

King scrubbed a hand over his face like he could erase everything that had happened with a quick swipe.

If only it were that easy.

"He could've died," he said again, voice pained as he looked at me. "*You* could've died."

"But I didn't," I finally said, and let go of Shep's hand to lean on the table beside my leader. "I'm still here, ruining your dinnerware and peace of mind."

"Still doesn't change the fact that all of this is happening because of me. I might've had an excuse for being distracted in Brazil, but not back then. I was arrogant."

"Which is why you're the boss," Shep pointed out. "Should you have looped someone in? Yes. But you did what you thought was right at the time. If we second-guessed every move we made, we'd never get anything done."

"Shep's right," I said. "A quality I like a little less every time I'm reminded of it."

King snorted. "Oh yes. That's definitely one of his most annoying qualities for sure. But also the reason he's the perfect second-in-command."

"You do both know I'm still standing here, right?" Shep said, crossing his arms over his broad chest.

"*Oui*." I nodded and winked at him. "But I think it's time you hear this about yourself."

"Well, as much as it pains me to admit it, I'm not *always* right. I think this whole situation proves that. If I'd been honest with King, told him about us from the beginning—"

"Then I still would've been distracted." King shrugged. "I wasn't ready for it."

"Me in particular, or Shep with anyone?" I asked, needing to know for some fucked-up reason whether it was just me he objected to, or if he

would’ve reacted the same way to anyone.

“Anyone,” King said, his eyes trained on Shep. But then he turned his head in my direction and shrugged. “I never thought about it, after we were over. The way it would feel to watch him move on. But it was harder than I expected.”

“I’d kill them,” I said matter-of-factly. “Whoever he moved on with.”

King’s lips pulled tight as though he were trying to hide a smirk. “I believe you.”

“So do I,” Shep said, and shook his head. “So let’s not put anyone in that position.”

I grinned and pushed up off the table, then walked over to Shep and pressed a kiss to his lips. “Aww, feeling sorry for my make-believe victim?”

“Yes. I don’t relish the idea of being the reason you end up in a jail cell.”

“Oh please, as if they’d ever catch me.”

King chuckled and got to his feet. “I’m not sure the promise of murder is the healthiest for showing affection, but I’m really happy for the two of you. But that still doesn’t mean I don’t want to catch and punish the motherfucker who is coming for us. I left a loose end, and it’s time to tie that shit up.”

Then, as if he’d somehow heard our entire conversation—which I wasn’t entirely sure he hadn’t through some sort of computer or listening device—Alessio’s name flashed across the phone that had been tossed to the floor along with King’s omelet.

“Okay, that’s just freaky,” I said, and bent down to pick it up and hand it to King. “Looks like it’s time to tie up those loose ends.”

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17

SHEP

WELL…SHIT. WHEN I'd heard the crash of dishes earlier, both East and I had bolted to the kitchen, ready to break apart a fight.

And now? King, Theo, and I had finally found some common ground after King's apology. That was all Theo had wanted. Acknowledgment. To hear that King knew he'd fucked up and that he appreciated and trusted Theo the same way Theo had.

Wasn't this a "Kumbaya" moment?

King took his phone from Theo, but instead of bringing it to his ear, he did something I'd never seen him do even during our time together—he answered the call on speaker, letting us in on the conversation.

"This better be good news," he said.

The sound of Alessio breathing heavily like he'd just run a marathon was all I could hear until he said, "I got him. I got the motherfucker."

My entire body froze.

"Did you hear me?" Alessio repeated. "I said—"

"You fuckin' got him." A smile curled Theo's mouth as his eyes met mine.

"Is that Theo?"

"Damn right it is," Theo said. "Shep's here too."

"Good. Saves me a call."

"Yes, yes, we're all here, now tell us what you found." My words came out a little demanding, but fuck, he'd said he found the guy, so I was allowed to be impatient.

“He’s a Libertine, all right,” Alessio said. “Aristide ‘Ari’ Moreau, better known as Aris Danforth.”

“Wait a goddamn minute.” King scrubbed a hand over his face and shook his head, like he was wondering if he’d heard right. “Ari Moreau? The French investor?”

“More like a high-level hacker from Chicago. His whole persona is bullshit.” Alessio still sounded out of breath, and it made me wonder if he’d chased the fucker across the city.

“Where are you now?” I asked.

“Where I always am. Why?”

So at Libertine in his cave of computers and tech gadgets. Good. “Just making sure you didn’t take matters into your own hands without backup. You sound a little…winded.”

“You’d be fuckin’ celebrating too if you finally caught the asshole who’d managed to slip by you for weeks.”

Theo grinned at me and mouthed, *Was he dancing or fucking?*

I snorted and shook my head, knowing there was no way it was the latter. Alessio had been too focused on cracking this mystery to even *consider* enjoying himself. He hadn’t even gone to confession nights, which we all knew were just an excuse to see Father Vitale—even if he refused to acknowledge the priest when we were there.

“You’re absolutely sure?” King asked.

“Positive. I’ve been tracking his online presence over the last two days to make sure he’s not communicating with anyone.”

“And?”

“Looks like he used to be a two-man show, but when you offed his brother, he went solo.”

King cursed. “Okay. So we need a plan. Obviously he’s aware that things went to shit in Brazil, otherwise he’d have Theo tied up in a storage unit—”

“Don’t fucking remind me,” I growled.

King grimaced. “So what would we do in that situation?”

“If things went to shit?” Theo said.

“Right?”

“We’d regroup. Come up with a new plan.”

“But we’d also be watching our backs,” I pointed out. “He’s going to be on high alert right now. Keeping a close eye on all of us to make sure we

aren’t onto him. We need to be smart. We need to lure him out. Have him come to us.”

“And how the hell are we going to do that?” Alessio said, his chair creaking as though he’d just flopped back into it.

I started to pace the room, my mind running over a hundred different scenarios. We had access to pretty much every event in New York, whether it be charitable, entertainment based, or political.

If we could host some kind of event and invited all our members, that would naturally include Ari. There’d be nothing suspicious about that. No reason for him to suspect we were onto him. It would give us an opportunity to observe him, and give him a false sense of normality.

“What about a party?”

King’s and Theo’s heads turned in my direction, skeptical looks on their faces.

“A party,” Theo said. “No offense, Shep, but I was thinking more an ambush in a dark alley with a gun.”

“That’s too obvious,” Alessio added. “Although we should definitely revisit that idea when it’s go time.”

“Keep talking,” King said, narrowing his eyes on me.

“What you said is true—Ari’s going to be on high alert. Paranoid. He’s going to be looking for any changes in our behavior, watching to see if we have any idea who he is. But what he doesn’t know is that we found his storage unit. He doesn’t know that Theo overheard his captor. All he knows is that Theo escaped. So he’s going to be doing his very best to blend in.”

“And what makes you think he’ll come?” King asked.

“So he appears cool and calm. Nothing going on over here.”

“*Oooorr…*” Theo drawled, looking between King and me, “you could use me as bait.”

Ice filled my veins and I adamantly shook my head. “Absolutely not.”

“No,” King said at the same time.

“Why not?” Theo replied, as though he hadn’t almost died less than a week ago.

“Because I said so,” I was quick to answer, before King had a chance to voice his own opinion.

“Excuse-moi? The last time I checked, I don’t need your permission.”

“Yes, you damn well do,” I said, marching back over to where Theo stood. He was out of his mind if he thought I was going to let him risk his

life again with this motherfucker. “I’m your second-in-command.”

Theo angled his chin up, his face turning a deep shade of red as irritation washed over the stubborn ass.

“You might be my second-in-command, but *he*”—he turned to face King—“is my King. My leader. You don’t get the final say here.”

“The hell I don’t—”

“I’m going to go now,” Alessio said through the phone before the line went dead, and I turned my wrath on King.

“Don’t you even think about letting him do this.”

“*Him?*” Theo sputtered out, and then jabbed me in the chest. “Don’t you mean *me*? I’m standing right here, you know.”

It was pretty hard to forget when all I wanted to do was strangle him. How could Theo suggest something so asinine? To use himself as bait. To suggest putting himself directly in harm’s way?

Hell, at this point, *I* might just kill him.

“Cut it out,” King said in that no-nonsense way he had about him. “Don’t you see what’s happening here? We’re fighting all over again. Butting heads over this fucker. We need to be thinking like a team, *agreeing* on a strategy and plan. Not going off half cocked, pissed off at one another.”

Theo muttered something in French that I didn’t understand, but if I had to guess, it wasn’t anything nice.

“I’m all for a plan,” I said. “As long as it doesn’t involve Theo as the bait.”

“*Putain*,” Theo growled, and whirled around on me. “Stop thinking about me like a fragile piece of glass that’s going to shatter. This asshole took me, Shep. He fucking *took* me, threatened my life and tried to ruin my reputation. If I have a chance to draw him out, to lure him into some kind of trap, you are not going to take that away from me.”

I balled my fists at my sides, fuming at the idea of Theo willing to risk his life for a chance of revenge on this guy.

“Shep,” King said quietly, and he didn’t have to say anything else for me to know whose side he was on.

I shook my head. “No.”

“I wasn’t asking.”

As I paced the room with my hands clasped behind my neck, Theo and King stood side by side, finally on the same page again after so long. While

that should've had me feeling relieved, all I felt at that moment was panic. They were both insane. There were better ways to go about this if they would just stop and *think* for a fucking minute.

"We have a chance here while he's not on the defensive," King said. "And don't forget who was number two on his list."

I didn't need to remember; I never forgot.

It was me.

But that still didn't mean I was ready to put Theo in danger.

"I don't like this," I said.

"I know." Theo rounded the table and took my hand. He rubbed his thumb against mine, trying to soothe me when it was impossible.

"We'll make sure he's safe," King said. "This guy doesn't like to do anything too public—"

"You forgetting the car bomb at the soccer game?"

"No. He didn't make his move *at* the game."

Fuck me. This was a losing battle, and I wasn't used to that. Didn't like it a bit.

A growl rumbled out of my throat, and I shook my head. "Goddamn you both."

"Aww, don't be like that," Theo said, smirking and kissing my shoulder before shooting a wink at King. "We were all just getting along so well."

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18

THEO

THE MOTHERFUCKER WAS mine.

It was only a matter of time now before I got my hands on the man who thought he could end my world. Who wanted to take his revenge not only on King, but every one of us connected to him.

But Alessio had come through, fucking genius that he was, and now we had a name and every last detail about Ari Moreau—or Aris Danforth, whoever the hell he was.

I didn't think I'd stopped grinning the whole drive back to Shep's place as I thought about all the possibilities of what I'd actually do once I finally came face to face with him. He wasn't a Libertine member I was overly familiar with, couldn't even recall having an actual conversation with him. Shep said he'd spoken with him a couple of times at one of our galas, but that he'd been someone who played under the radar. In the mix, but never getting too close to bring attention to himself. A familiar face, but a superficial acquaintance who was chosen because of investments he brought into our club.

Investments. More like stolen money.

I was so in my own head that I didn't notice how quiet Shep was until we'd arrived at his building and his driver opened the door for us. He was cautious as he stepped out onto the sidewalk, his eyes scanning everywhere, his hand close to the gun he'd been keeping tucked away every time we walked out of his place.

Always on alert and still my bodyguard, I thought as I climbed out after him. I usually had my own weapons, but Shep had stripped me of those before heading to King's. I couldn't imagine why. I was on my very best behavior, had even managed to squeeze an apology out of our leader. That alone was a huge weight off my shoulders, because feeling like I didn't have the trust of King or my brothers had shaken me to my core in a way I'd never fully let on, even to Shep.

But he knew. He always knew, just like I knew he'd retreated into himself after I volunteered as bait.

With the coast clear, he quickly ushered us inside, and it wasn't until we were safely in his penthouse that I heard him exhale.

As I shrugged out of my jacket, Shep kicked his shoes off by the entrance and then stalked to the kitchen.

Oh, he was still pissed—and apparently giving me the silent treatment.

I didn't do well with that.

Running my hand through my hair, I sighed and followed after him, preparing myself for yet another argument. Jesus, you would think I got off on those.

But Shep's back was to me as he pulled a bottle of vodka out of the freezer, along with a stainless-steel shaker.

"*Putain.* I've driven you to drink?" I teased, trying to lighten the heaviness I could feel in the room. "Or was it King? He's caused many a hangover for me."

Shep didn't say a word as he grabbed a large knife from a drawer.

"Have I driven you to murder too?" I said, shaking my head. "You can put the knife down and just take it out on my body instead. I won't mind."

He finally looked at me then, but the man I'd finally come to know so well had an unreadable look all over that handsome face. If I had to guess, he was feeling several emotions right now, the same as I was, and somewhere in there had to be a sense of relief that this would all be over soon.

Although that didn't seem to be his primary emotion at the moment.

Shep grabbed a fresh lemon from the bowl of fruit and began to slice it, his use of the knife clean and sharp—and deadly. He tossed the slices into the shaker, added a healthy amount of vodka and the lid, and began to shake the hell out of it, much harder than he needed to.

I swallowed a groan and pulled myself up onto the counter beside him, forcing him to be in my orbit whether he wanted to or not.

“You have to talk to me, you know,” I said. “If you need to yell, go for it.”

Still shaking the vodka to hell and back, Shep cocked his head at me, those full, kissable lips set into a grimace that shouldn’t have been as sexy as it was. I wanted to nibble on those lips, suck that delicious tongue into my mouth, and spend the night celebrating. How did he not want the same? Were *my* lips just not as tempting as his were? He could resist me better than I could him?

No. Impossible.

He grabbed a couple of crystal tumblers, poured the vodka into both—all the way to the very top—and then handed me one.

Hell, I supposed it was promising he was still sharing.

“What are we drinking to?” I asked, lifting my legs to wrap around his body and pull him in closer. I kept him in a tight hold as I looked up at him, but to his credit, he wasn’t trying to move away. Those blue eyes were full of a deeper emotion than just anger, and I bit the inside of my cheek as I waited for his answer.

“To being smart and staying safe,” he said, tapping my glass and holding my gaze as he brought the drink to his lips.

I sighed. “Shep—”

“Just drink.” He tipped my glass toward my mouth, and I swallowed back the lemon-tinged vodka. It was icy cold and refreshing, but he was drinking under an illusion if he thought this meant I was agreeing with his point of view.

“I think we should talk.”

“*Now* you think we should talk?” Shep pursed his lips and nodded. “Seems about right.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

He shrugged then moved out of my hold, walking over to the opposite side of the kitchen, where he leaned back against the counter and took my measure.

Usually I’d bask in his once-over, but the frown he’d been sporting seconds ago deepened, letting me know that whatever he was thinking wasn’t anything flattering.

“Shep?”

“It just means that we always seem to do the talking when *you’re* ready.” He eyed me over the rim of his glass. “The other night when you were fuming over what we found in the locker, you wanted to drink, I wanted to talk—you won. This morning, you wanted to offer yourself up as bait, and I wanted to think of any other plan. Again—you won.”

“I didn’t realize this was a contest.”

“It’s *not*,” he boomed, slamming his glass down on the counter. “But it’d be nice to know you gave a shit one way or another how I felt about things.”

“I do,” I said, slipping off the marble and crossing over to him.

“Really?”

“Of course I care—”

“Then don’t do this.”

I shook my head, my own frustrated feelings beginning to surface. I understood where he was coming from, but I needed him to see where I was too. This was my chance to reclaim my power. To exact revenge.

“You can’t ask me that.”

“The hell I can’t.” He narrowed his eyes on me, his gaze roving over my face as though he were memorizing every inch of it. “Do you know how scared I was when you were taken in Brazil? How fucking useless I felt? I was there to protect you, Theo. That was literally my only job, and I failed. *Failed* at keeping the person I love the most safe. And now you’re asking me to just sit on the sidelines and watch you serve yourself up to this guy on a fucking platter? No. I can’t. I *won’t* do it.”

There was a whole lot to unpack there. A lot of emotions filling the space between us, but all my mind kept coming back to was…

“You love me?”

“What?”

The confused look on Shep’s handsome face had me smiling as I closed the final inches between us and put my hands on his chest.

“You just said I was the person you love the most.”

Shep’s jaw twitched.

“You love me,” I said again, and this time I slid my hands up behind his neck so I could press my lips to his jaw. “You love me and you want to protect me, and that is hot as fuck.”

“Stop it, Theo.”

"*Non*," I whispered, kissing my way up to his ear. "Because I love you too. So damn much. It was the one thing that kept me going when they took me. Your voice, your logic—you. I needed to get back to you. Was *determined* to get back to you."

Shep turned until we were nose to nose. "Then why put yourself in danger again?"

"I'm not going to *be* in danger." I reached for his cheek and stroked the stubble there. "You'll be there. Our brothers will be there. Nothing's going to happen to me."

"It can't," he said, turning fully then and reaching for my face, pressing his forehead to mine. "I can't lose you, not again. I won't."

"No, you won't. But this is also for you. He's coming for you next, and if you think for one minute I'm letting him get anywhere near you, you're out of your mind."

Shep's lips lifted as he ran a hand down my neck. "You're right."

"Well, yes, I often am, but, um…would you like to be more specific?"

"Your loving me and wanting to protect me—it's hot as fuck."

"Right?" I nipped at his lower lip and grinned. "I need to do this, Shep. I need to feel proactive in this fight. He's always been one step ahead, and this time we have a chance to draw him out. We have a chance to be the ones in control. Don't ask me to wait on the sidelines."

"Pretty sure I already did."

"True."

"And you said no."

"True again."

Shep took in a deep breath then let it out. "So since you're being stubborn about it, I only have one request."

I leaned back to look him in the eye, unsure where he was going with this. "What's that?"

"I'm going to be right there with you. Not in the shadows, and not in a car watching. If you're going to be front and center as Prince of Monaco for the whole world to see, then I guess Shepard O'Neil Winchester the Third is going to make an appearance too."

"I always forget the O'Neil," I said, then winked at him. "Such a mouthful."

"Don't change the subject. Do we have a deal?"

I moved up to meet his lips with mine. "We have a deal."

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19

SHEP

THEO'S MOUTH PARTED, and I swept my tongue inside to taste him, effectively sealing our deal. It wasn't the outcome I'd wanted, but every relationship needed compromise, and I was realizing there wasn't anything I wouldn't do for the man who'd stolen my heart.

Fuck, I'd told him I loved him and hadn't even realized the words had come out of my mouth. Obviously I'd known, had been trying not to say it until the right moment, but there was no controlling how I felt about Theo.

And he loves me too…

My chest squeezed, my heart feeling so full I thought it would burst, because holy shit. I was in love with Theo Rinaldi. Never in my wildest dreams had I expected the two of us to end up together, yet here we were, making promises in my kitchen.

Life was funny that way. Only a few weeks ago I'd felt more alone than I had in my life and didn't see that changing anytime soon, and now…

I didn't just have Theo in my arms with his mouth on mine—I had his heart.

"Say it again," I whispered against his lips before dropping my forehead to his. This time I wanted to hear it, *really* hear it and soak it up.

Theo lifted his head, those stunning blue eyes meeting mine and drawing me in. He brought his hands up to cradle my neck. "I love you, Shep. I never want to know what it's like to not love you."

I didn't know why his face began to blur until I felt his thumb brush under my eye, and then he pressed a kiss to the same spot.

“You’re mine now,” he said, giving me a smile that had that edge of mischievousness that was so Theo and exactly the man I’d fallen in love with. He drew his hands down my hoodie, then moved them up underneath to touch me. His hands were cool against my skin as he trailed his fingers up over my abs, then up my chest to pinch my nipples.

I bit down on my lip as the tweak of pressure shot lust straight to my dick, which, judging by the smirk on Theo’s face, was exactly what he’d wanted.

He pulled my hoodie up, and I lifted my arms, letting him take it off me and toss it somewhere across the room.

“*Si sexy et tout à moi,*” he said, and I cursed that I didn’t know what he was saying—other than the fact that it was clearly nothing bad, with him looking at me the way he was.

I needed to learn French—the sooner, the better.

“Let me guess,” I said, as he lifted his own shirt over his head and got rid of it, “you said something about how you want to lick every inch of me?”

“No, that would be: *Je veux lécher chaque centimètre de ta peau.* And I do.” His hands went to the waist of his pants, flicking them open. He slowly drew down the zipper, making a show for me that had my cock straining behind my jeans. “But I said, ‘So sexy and all mine.’”

“Damn French,” I said, palming my erection and giving it a rough rub.

Theo’s eyes heated at the move, and he shoved his pants and boxer briefs off and stepped out of them. “I can teach you.” His breath was a whisper against my lips as he moved my hand aside and slipped his own into my briefs. The second his fingers wrapped around me, I gasped. “Say, *‘Je veux te baiser, mon amour.’*”

The way he said it was a seductive caress, but when I attempted the phrase and stumbled over the pronunciation, completely butchering it, Theo’s lips curved.

“Sounds like you said you want to fuck me, my love.” The hand he had around my dick squeezed, making me moan, and then he said, “Permission granted.”

Fuck, that was hot, and I wasn’t waiting another second to get him beneath me. My mouth crashed down on his as I hauled him up against me, lifting him so that he wrapped his legs around my waist.

Thank fuck my bed wasn't far, because I didn't want a quick fuck against a counter—I wanted him writhing in my sheets.

When my knees hit the mattress, I dropped him onto it so I could get rid of my jeans. Theo scooted up the bed, that beautiful body still bruised, but getting stronger every day. He widened his legs in invitation, lowering his hand to his cock and teasing the head with his fingers as he watched me watch him.

I reached inside my top drawer for the lube and tossed it on the mattress before climbing up over him. I ran my hands over his spectacular legs, the muscles strong and flexed under my fingers.

"Spread these for me," I said in a voice I barely recognized, as I stared down at the most spectacular body I'd ever had under me.

Theo immediately obeyed, then upped the ante when he reached for his knees and pulled them up to his chest. My dick throbbed at the carnal sight of him, and the knowledge I was about to be buried deep inside him.

I poured some of the lube into my hand and dropped between his legs, trailing my fingers down the heated strip of skin he'd exposed to me. With my eyes locked on his, I slowly slid my finger up and down the sensitive skin until I reached his tight little hole.

Theo sucked in a breath, his body clenching as I teased and tormented his opening before moving my hand back up to his balls. I cradled them in my hand, fondling him gently, as I scooted in closer on my knees and wrapped a second hand around his cock.

Theo's eyes slid shut as his feet hit the mattress, then he arched back into the pillow and pushed his hips up, and I watched on hungrily as his thick cock glided through my fist, the shiny head peeking through the opening and showing me just how excited he was.

"So goddamn gorgeous," I whispered as he began to writhe on the bed and use my fist like he would my ass if he were in it. I let go of his shaft and Theo moaned at the loss of contact, but I needed to be closer, needed to be inside him—now.

I dragged my fingers down the underside of his length, and when it jerked in response, I couldn't help my smile. It seemed he was just as eager as I was, just as needy. So much so that this time, when I reached his entrance, Theo wrapped a hand around his cock and gave himself a rough pull.

"*Putain*, Shep. Put something in me."

My lips quirked at his breathy demand. “Please?”

Theo dragged his tongue over his lower lip and answered in true royal form, “Now.”

I chuckled at his impatience, and the way it matched mine, and was struck yet again by just how perfect we were for one another.

“How could I ever refuse such an order?” I quickly slipped a finger inside of him, making him groan. “Oh, I like the sound of that—let me hear it again,” I said as I pulled my index finger free and tunneled back inside with two.

His curse was full of guttural pleasure as I began to scissor and swivel my fingers inside him, stretching him wide and getting him ready for what came next. Then I twisted my hand, located his p-spot, and massaged it until he was stroking his dick in time to each thrust of my hand.

“Shep,” he panted, as he jacked his hips up and then bore down on the fingers I had lodged in him. “Shep, I need…”

I knew exactly what he needed, as his voice faded out and his toes curled into the mattress. But, no longer content to be a bystander to his pleasure, I pulled my fingers free and reached for the lube again. I slicked up my palm and looked down at the beautiful man still working his cock as I got ready for him. When I moved between his knees and Theo reached down to pull his legs open for me, I gave thanks that this man was mine.

I guided myself to his waiting body, catching and holding his blue gaze.

“I love you,” I told him, wanting him to know that that moment in the kitchen, the absent-minded way I’d confessed my feelings, wasn’t some accident, that this connection we shared went way beyond the physical—it was soul deep, something I wanted him to see on my face, hear in my voice, and feel through my body when I laid claim to him right here in my bed. “In ways I never knew possible.”

Theo blinked up at me, his eyes swirling with all the emotions coursing through me. “*Je t’aime aussi*,” he said, and I didn’t need to understand a lick of French to know he’d just said it back. I could see his heart right there in his eyes.

I gently pushed forward, and as his body enveloped mine, my eyes slid shut and I savored every delicious sensation of being back inside my man.

“Shep,” Theo moaned as I bottomed out. Our lips met in a kiss full of all the love, tenderness, and affection I felt for him. The enormity of those

emotions outweighed any other in that moment as I allowed myself to finally let down the last of my walls and show him every side of me.

I braced my hands on either side of him, as Theo's tongue swept inside my mouth to rub up against mine. His body clenched around my throbbing cock, demanding I move.

"Take me, Shep," he whispered against my lips as he trailed his fingers down my cheek. "Love me."

I brushed a soft kiss across his jaw, up to his ear. "I already do."

His breath caught on a groan. As he arched up underneath me and his eyes shut, I ran my hand down his side to his thigh and took hold, keeping him steady as I began to move.

In and out, I rocked over the top of him, shallow thrusts that widened him and let him get used to the fullness. I savored the look, touch, and feel of him as he wound his arms around my neck and held on for the tumultuous ride ahead. But there was no stopping it now. Not when I had him wrapped up in my arms, and his breath was mingling with mine on every sigh.

He was perfect. Everything I'd ever wanted. And he'd been right there in front of me all along.

"Open your eyes. I want to see you," I said, looking down at his gorgeous face. "I want you to see me."

Theo's legs tightened around me as he craned up to say against my mouth, "Eyes shut or eyes open, you're *all* I see. All I want. Just you…"

My heart swelled, and I crushed him to me, taking his mouth in a fierce kiss. All of the love and protectiveness I felt poured out of me as I got caught up in the pure rush of desire.

Theo knew me, understood me and wanted me in all the ways I needed, and nothing had ever felt more powerful than that acceptance, that feeling of belonging fully to another. I began to move inside of him as though we were one.

One mind. One body. One soul.

Every move I started, he ended. His hands in my hair, anchoring me to him in a way nothing else could, as I drove us both to the very heights of ecstasy, where we both lingered, never wanting the moment to end.

It wasn't until he put his hand over my heart and said, "*Il est à moi.* Mine," that we finally let go, understanding that this was something far beyond the coming together of two bodies.

It was the coming together of two men, two lives, two hearts. Forever.

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THEO

"I HAVE SEEN a *lot* of men in a *lot* of different tuxedos, but I have to say that you, Shepard Winchester, wear one better than anyone I have ever seen before."

Shep smirked, fastening his cuff links as I moved in behind him, inspecting his tall frame in the full-length mirror. The classic black tux had been made for him—literally, was custom-made for him by a preeminent designer—and it molded to his fit body so perfectly he made my mouth water.

"You've got a bit of drool just there," he said, pointing to the side of his mouth as he winked at me in the mirror.

"Have you *seen* you? It's a goddamn miracle I haven't come in my fucking pants."

"The night's still young."

"Don't issue a challenge and think I won't follow through with it," I teased, nipping at the lobe of his ear. "I have no shame making a scene if that means I get you."

His grin widened as he turned around and gripped the lapels of my jacket. "You already have me."

"Not naked and begging for my cock tonight, I don't."

He brushed his mouth over mine, just lightly grazing but not yet wanting to pull back, and that was when I felt it—his tension rising.

"Stop worrying," I murmured before capturing his lips again, distracting him with my tongue. For a long moment, he let me, kissing me back until

we were both breathless.

Leave it to his driver buzzing the intercom to ruin a moment, and Shep pulled back reluctantly and sighed. He didn't go anywhere yet, though, wrapping his arms around me tightly instead.

I tried to lighten the mood I could feel getting heavier. "You can't admire my ass if you don't let me go."

"I'll never let you go."

I swallowed hard at the emotion in his tone, so much more behind it than a simple moment between us.

Shep was worried. He didn't like the plan, and it was happening anyway, but he was overreacting. Everything was going to go accordingly, and we were going to catch this motherfucker, have *fun* with him for a few hours.

And then we'd be right back here, basking in our shared relief and ripping each other's custom tuxes off.

The intercom buzzed again, and when Shep didn't let go, just as he said he wouldn't, I reached behind me for his hands and linked our fingers.

"Hey? We've got this. That asshole has no idea what's coming for him, and tonight it's a whole lot of pain."

Shep arched his brow dubiously, and I brought our joined hands up to my lips and kissed his knuckles.

"You really should be more excited. I might even let you help me play with him if you manage a smile tonight."

His scowl somehow made him even more attractive, as fucked up as that was. "I want to torture him."

"Play, torture—same thing, handsome." I grinned and then the intercom buzzed yet again, and I tugged Shep toward the elevator.

We'd gotten ready together, but we'd be riding to and arriving at King's gala separately. Neither one of us wanted to hide the other in the shadows anymore, but tonight wasn't the night to call attention to our relationship. Not yet. Once Ari was out of the picture, though, it was game on. I wouldn't hesitate to grab Shep's hand and never let go in front of any and everyone.

"You're right," he said as the elevator doors closed. "Your ass looks phenomenal in those pants."

I grinned. "Fucking told you."

The trip down felt like it took only seconds, but just as the doors began to open, Shep hit a button to keep them closed.

“Keep your eyes open tonight. Promise?”

“I promise I’ll *try* not to stare at you all night, yes.”

“I mean it, Theo. Stay alert until we grab this guy.”

I moved in close and reached up to smooth the deep line between his eyebrows. “Don’t worry about me. Just keep yourself safe.” When his frown only deepened, I shook my head. “Shep, please. Nothing’s going to happen, but if, God forbid, something does, don’t try to be a hero. You’ve already saved me once—”

“And I’d do it again.”

“You’re not gonna have to do it again. The plan is perfect. You and I will do the red carpet thing, give a little wave, and then meet back up inside.”

Shep lifted his hand like he wanted to cup my face but then brushed his thumb over my lips instead. “You covered the last of your bruises well.”

“Thank fuck for concealer.”

“Yeah, that would’ve invited a few questions.”

He gave me a half-hearted smile before dropping his hand, but I wasn’t letting him get away that easily. I gripped him by the neck and brought his mouth down on mine, and the second our lips touched, his parted easily. He kissed me like he was hungry for me—or like it was the last time he’d ever get to. The intensity made me dizzy, but I held on to him tightly, devouring that exquisite mouth until there was no doubt how I felt about him. Until it washed away any doubt he had about tonight.

That was the hope, at least, as the elevator made a warning sound and Shep reluctantly let go of both me and the button he’d been holding down.

The door opened and we made our way outside to the separate limos we’d be taking.

The event King had thrown together for Libertine wasn’t just a members-only gala, but would have some of the biggest names in Hollywood also walking the red carpet. Archer Carrington, Benoit’s bestie and one of our members, had stepped up tonight to run the event that was being touted publicly as a fundraiser—and while it was, that wasn’t the whole story. We just needed a reason to get Ari right where we wanted him and have the opportunity to slip away to take care of business without anyone missing us.

And since the motherfucker had already RSVP’d, we knew he’d be there.

The driver opened my door and stood to the side as I made my approach, and just before I slipped inside I glanced back to see that Shep was waiting by his door looking over at me.

I raised a hand and gave a quick wave, and he responded with a small smile and a clipped nod. That was when I knew he wouldn't get in his car until he knew I was safely tucked away in mine. So after a final once-over, I climbed inside the vehicle and buckled in.

From the moment we'd found out about Ari and set this plan into action, I'd been low-key vibrating with bottled-up energy. I wanted to catch this asshole and finally put to bed this nightmare he'd unleashed on me over the past month. Tonight was just one more step in that direction.

It was time to draw this fucker out into the open. Draw him out and put an end to his miserable fucking life.

The limo pulled away from Shep's place, entering the evening traffic like a well-choreographed dance. I checked my watch to see we were keeping perfect time. We'd arrive at the gala, walk the red carpet, give the paparazzi a chance to take our photos and rub it in Ari's face that I was alive and not about to be run out of town.

He might want to fracture us, but tonight I planned to show him that I was back in Libertine's orbit, and we were all tighter than ever. If I'd had *my* way, I would've flaunted mine and Shep's relationship and how he'd brought us *particularly* close. But everyone else seemed to think that might have him switching focus early.

It was better to stick with his pattern. Let him think he was still in control of this situation.

Little did he know…

I reached for the earpiece Alessio had given us all the other night when we'd been hatching this plan and put it in.

Seconds later I heard over the com, "Everyone on air?"

The responses came in quick.

"Lucien, over."

"King, over."

"Benoit, over."

The three who would be accompanying us on the red carpet, and were already in their cars, answered first, and a sigh of relief washed over me. The reminder that my brothers had my back tonight was exactly what I needed to calm the nerves that had been just beneath the surface.

“Lachlan here. Just arrived. Moving up to position now. Over.” He sounded as though he were taking the stairs two at a time, which he likely was. When we’d picked tonight’s venue we’d made a strategic move, making sure to choose a space that had a vacant building opposite the red carpet walkway.

We wanted to have a vantage point. We wanted Lachlan’s eyes and gun trained on whoever might show up, just in case Ari was that fucking stupid.

Then I heard the one voice that could make my body both relax and sit up and take notice at the same time.

“Shep, over.”

I closed my eyes and imagined him sitting beside me in the car, his warm, strong hand in mine, and couldn’t help my smile. I couldn’t wait until we could arrive at one of these functions together. To show the world who had finally snagged the most eligible bachelor in America. But tonight I had to play the game. I had to act the friend to the sexiest man alive, and I wasn’t sure I could pull it off.

Here Shep was all worried about Ari and what he had in store for us tonight, and one of *my* main concerns was that I wouldn’t be able to keep shit professional.

It wasn’t like a royal could just announce a relationship without looping people in. *Putain*, my family would have my ass. If they found out about our relationship through sources other than me, they would be horrified. Mother would claim a diplomatic disaster, even if she loved Shep.

There was a way to do things, proper protocol to follow, and for the first time in my life I found myself wanting to do it right.

I loved Shep. I wanted this—whatever *this* was—between us to have every opportunity to succeed. So I would do my best to behave tonight, which would be a monumentally difficult task, given how phenomenal he looked in that tuxedo.

“Theo, you there? Over.” Alessio’s voice came through the com a little firmer than before, letting me know I’d missed my check-in while busy daydreaming.

“Theo here, over.”

The limo made a turn one block from the event, moving closer to the drop-off point.

“Okay,” Alessio said, “Lachlan’s got eyes on you all from above. I’m in position across the street and we have each of you walking in one after the

other. Theo, you're up first, then Shep, King, Lucien, and Benoit."

We all confirmed, and as the limo drew to a crawl and then finally stopped at the exit point where crowds of paparazzi and onlookers had gathered, I took in a deep breath and let it out.

This was it. This was our chance to get this fucker, and as my door was pulled open and the cool night air rushed in, my pulse began to race.

"Okay, let's do this," I said, and climbed out of the limo. The second my foot touched the sidewalk, camera flashes went off in a frenzy of bright lights and my eyes shifted to where Shep was exiting his vehicle, his smile in place, gaze sweeping the crowd and finally zeroing in on me.

I gave a cordial nod and smile as though we were two friends who hadn't known the other was coming tonight, instead of two men who would be going home to *make* each other come tonight. Then I headed toward the red carpet for my first stop in the step-and-repeat lines.

"Who are you wearing tonight, Prince Rinaldi?"

"Prince Rinaldi, are you happy to be back in the U.S. again?"

"Now that your brother's married, are you next?"

My eyes caught and held on the lady who'd just asked about my marital plans, and I couldn't help my smirk, my years of charming the press kicking into full gear.

"I'd need a boyfriend first, don't you think?"

She smiled at me, pleased I'd engaged with her. "So you're single, then?"

It took everything I had not to look at the gorgeous man who'd just stepped onto the red carpet behind me to a roar of questions and flashing cameras.

Instead, I winked at the woman and threw her a quote she could run on. "I didn't say that."

Before she could get out a follow-up, I slipped my hands into my pockets and moved along, careful to scan the crowd, looking for anything and anyone out of place.

"Over here, Prince Rinaldi."

"Prince Rinaldi, how long are you staying in the States this time?"

That answer was easy enough—as long as Shep would have me.

Not that I would tell any of *them* that.

I stopped at the next group of reporters and moved into position for the photographers, looking down the line to where Shep was smiling and

answering questions. King stood solo and serious as always, Lucien was charming everyone like the handsome devil he was, and Benoit was flirting his way through the crowds.

We made quite the carpet. Each of us were acquaintances, as far as the public was aware: King, the billionaire businessman and head of TerraKohr; Shepard O'Neil Winchester the third, son of former President Winchester; Lucien, the owner of the most exclusive adult clubs in the world; Benoit, the son of one of the wealthiest families in Europe—and me, the Prince of Monaco.

Little did they know we were so much more to each other.

Tonight we were putting on a show no one had been able to refuse, and as I moved to the end of the step-and-repeat, it seemed the guest of honor had finally decided to show up. Turned out Ari Moreau *was* fucking stupid.

Something he announced loud and clear, as a hail of gunfire broke out and chaos ensued.

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SHEP

THE SECOND THE shots rang through the air, I was moving.

And so was everyone else.

Screams rent the air as the realization of what was happening had everyone scrambling to escape, but I only had one thing in mind, and that was getting to Theo.

He'd been nearly off the red carpet, but not soon enough, and panic struck my heart as another shot rang out.

"Theo, get down," I yelled as I ran toward him, only for him to turn around in the wrong goddamn direction, like he was seeking out the gunman. "Theo, no—"

I could hear the other Kings in my ear, shouting out orders, but I couldn't focus on a word they said as yet more shots rang out. As everyone around me ducked or ran in the opposite direction, I finally reached Theo, slamming into him hard and tackling him to the ground. He grunted beneath me on impact, and I scrambled to make sure I covered every inch of his body with mine.

"Are you okay? You're not hit?" My voice came out stronger than I felt with the fear dominating. I held him close, keeping his head tucked into my shoulder as I scanned the chaos of the red carpet to see where the fuck the gunman was.

"I-I think I'm good."

Lachlan was yelling in the earpiece, and it took me a second to realize he had eyes on Ari. "Beneath the banner moving in on Shep. I can't get a

clear shot—”

“On it,” King growled, sounding like he was running hard.

“I’ve got Theo,” I said.

“Shep—” Theo shifted beneath me and I tightened my grip, not letting the fucker trying to get to him have even an inch of open space.

“Don’t move.”

“You’re an open fucking target,” Theo shouted. “Get somewhere safe.”

“You *are* safe. I’ve got you.” I lifted my head, searching in the direction of the banner where Ari was, and that was when I saw him.

His slicked-back black hair had come loose in the front, pieces falling over wild eyes that locked with mine. It felt like everything turned to slow motion then as he lifted his arm, pointing the gun directly at me. A slow, unhinged smile curled his mouth, and for the first time I could see the monster that had been lying in wait. No more polished and put-together businessman, the tux he wore nothing more than a façade.

He walked toward me and I secured my hold on Theo. If I reached for my gun, I’d leave him exposed, and I wasn’t going to risk it. Ari would have to get his number two on the list, because he sure as fuck wasn’t getting number one.

I was going to die. Right here on a red carpet protecting the man I loved.

It was worth it.

“I’ve got the shot—” Lachlan shouted.

“Hold your fire,” King said, “I’ve got—”

Someone slammed into Ari out of nowhere, sending his gun flying out of his hands as the figure tackling him threw him to the ground.

All I saw was long, dark hair as the man straddled Ari, jerked him up by his shirt, and punched him so hard in the face that I could hear the cracking sound.

Holy shit. Alessio.

He reared his arm back, hitting Ari in the face again and again, blood spattering his fist and the front of Ari’s shirt.

Fuck, he was going to kill him, and that honor belonged to Theo, no one else.

“He’s down,” King said, both to us and to Alessio as he reached them and grabbed hold of Alessio’s arm to stop him. “Lachlan, are there others?”

“Negative. The only shots fired came from Ari, but I’ve got my guys searching the perimeter.”

I was so focused on the scene happening in front of me that I didn’t notice Benoit and Lucien looming, protectively blocking us as they searched the scene. Many of the attendees had scattered, some of them, along with press, hiding inside the venue.

“He’s secured,” King said, and I looked back to see Ari face down on the ground, his hands bound behind him with handcuffs. But there was no police in sight, at least not yet, though their sirens screamed through the night as they headed in our direction.

“Don’t kill him,” Theo grunted under my hold. “He’s mine.”

“Shit,” Lucien said, worry in his eyes as he looked down at us. “Is one of you hit?”

I lifted up off Theo, fear back at the thought that I hadn’t gotten to him in time. That he was too in shock to notice he’d been shot.

“Shep? Oh God. Are you bleeding?” Theo sat up, scrambling toward me as I rolled off him, a searing pain suddenly shooting through my arm.

He reached for me, blood smearing his fingers when he touched the arm of my jacket.

“*Putain*, get this off,” he shouted, his voice shaking a little as he pushed my jacket off my shoulders and carefully down my arms.

That was blood, all right. Soaking through the white sleeve of my right arm.

Theo tore open my cuff and lifted the sleeve up, but fuck, all that red stuff was starting to make me woozy. That wasn’t usually a problem for me, but then again, it’d never been *my* blood I’d had to deal with.

“Don’t look at it,” Theo said quietly when I listed to the side and caught myself. I closed my eyes, but when he cursed, they flew back open.

My forearm had a deep gash tearing down the side of it, and it hurt like a bitch, but there was no bullet lodged inside. I didn’t think. It was hard to tell, and I closed my eyes again as nausea threatened.

“You’re okay. It’s just a graze,” Theo murmured, and I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or himself as he took off his cummerbund and wrapped it around my arm. “Sorry.”

“What are you sorry f— *Motherfucker*,” I cursed as he tugged the ends of the silk material tightly together to stanch the blood flow.

“That. We need to stop the bleeding.”

I nodded, knowing he was right, but that didn't stop the painful throb in my bicep. This was the last thing I needed or wanted. For the first time since Theo had been threatened, we had the fucker responsible under our control, and I'd be damned if I let a mere graze keep me from going a few rounds with him.

"Good, it's stopped. Now let's go. I want—"

"You're not going anywhere," Theo said as I tried to get to my feet, "except the hospital."

I scanned the crowds of paparazzi and partygoers as they all huddled for cover, some of them crying, some of them shouting, while others were silent and wide-eyed. But me? I was none of those things. I was pissed. And there was no way I was going to the hospital.

"Fuck that." I made a move to get to my feet again, but the burning pain that shot through my arm had me sucking in a gulp of air.

Jesus, that stings.

"Shep," Theo said, reaching out to cradle my face, his eyes full of worry as he studied me. "You were just shot. I need you to get checked out."

"I'm fine. It's just a flesh wound."

"That could be worse than we think."

"It's not—"

"You don't know that," Theo said, a little firmer this time. "What if there's bullet fragments in there? What if you're in shock? What if—"

"Theo…" I reached for him, my hand going to the back of his neck and pulling him in close enough that I could rest my forehead to his. "I'm fine. I promise."

"But there's so much blood."

"It's not the first time and won't be the last," I whispered, and when our eyes met, I saw the love swirling in his.

"You could've died."

"But I didn't."

"But you *could* have."

"Kind of like you in Wales *and* Brazil?"

"That was different. He was after me. That bullet was *meant* for me, not you."

"And it didn't get either of us. Not how he wanted."

Theo shut his eyes, and I squeezed the back of his neck, trying to reassure him, but I knew firsthand that only time would do that. Time to see

I wasn’t going to drop dead at his feet.

“Uh, guys?” Benoit’s voice filtered past the rapid beats of my heart. “I hate to break this up, but you might want to finish this elsewhere. People are starting to come back around.”

“Benoit’s right,” Lucien said, after a quick glance over his shoulder. “You should go now, and we’ll stay here and take care of this. I’m guessing you two have somewhere else you’d rather be?”

“*Oui*. I want to get Shep to—”

“*Libertine*,” I interrupted, stubborn as ever. “Where we all said we’d meet.”

Benoit held up his hands. “I’ll let you two hash that out.”

“There’s nothing to argue about,” I said, finally getting to my feet, and when Theo stood opposite me, I braced myself. The last thing I needed was to pass out or fall over in front of him. I’d never hear the end of it.

“My arm is fine. It’s nothing. Plus, I want a piece of this fucker who tried to kill you *again*. Don’t deny me.”

Theo’s jaw bunched as he gave me another quick once-over, then he finally relented. “Okay, but if I think for one second you need a hospital—”

“Then I’ll go.”

“All right, then, let’s get out of here. I have a few questions for this asshole myself.”

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THEO

KING, LACHLAN, AND Alessio were gone with Ari before the cops arrived on the scene, with Shep and I following after. The disaster of a gala was over before it began, and Lucien and Benoit took up the task of handling things while the rest of us went to Libertine.

To our underground hideaway.

To the last place Ari would ever see.

The place he would take his final breath.

Uneven stone walls, raw and jagged, surrounded us on all sides, moody shadows covering half the vast space as Shep, King, and I stood surrounding the man tied to the lone chair in the room. There was a predatory stillness, the clock ticking down Ari's last heartbeats. Pure rage still flowed through my veins, and it was all I could do to stand there while Alessio and Lachlan bolted the door shut behind us and then stood guard.

Leaving the three of us with a reason to draw blood waiting for who would make the first move.

I flexed my fingers at my side before balling them back into a fist as I studied the man who had to tried to take everything from me. From Shep. From King. All of us. He'd almost succeeded more than once, and that was too many close calls for me.

Deep cuts from Alessio's fist marred one side of Ari's face, and his nose was definitely broken. Blood had stopped pouring out of it, but had dried down his mouth and chin.

Still he looked straight ahead defiantly, not acknowledging any of us.

King arched a brow at us in question, and Shep and I gave curt nods for him to go ahead. Let King start this shit off, because I was going to be the one to finish it.

“I’ll give you this. You play a long game.” King’s voice was deadly calm as he stepped forward, looking down his nose at Ari. Had I been on the other side of his interrogation, that would’ve scared me more than anything. That “calm” was a smokescreen.

Ari didn’t say a word to that, and it wasn’t because his jaw was broken. Alessio had been pulled off him just in time, so the guy was beaten and bruised, but he could still give us the answers we wanted.

“Now’s the time to say your piece. You’ve waited years for the chance.” King spread his hands wide, offering him the floor, and Ari scoffed.

“Why don’t you just shoot me in the head and get it over with? That’s your MO, right? Shoot first, don’t bother with the questions.” He shook his head in disgust and spat on the floor by King’s polished shoes.

“He was your brother,” Shep spoke up, sounding more levelheaded than I could even fathom after being shot at. But that was Shep’s superpower, his unwavering control. The icier he got, the more terrifying he was. “Any of us would’ve done the same thing. Your only downfall was in underestimating us.”

Ari’s eyes shifted past King to narrow on Shep. “Hardly. I played you and lover boy there like a fiddle. Add in a jealous *King* and every single one of you walked right into my trap.”

I cocked my head, running my eyes over the pathetic bastard. “Says the asshole tied to the chair.”

Ari then turned his attention to me, his number one. “How are your ribs feeling, *Prince* Rinaldi? I heard they made a satisfying cracking sound that echoed through the jung—”

Shep’s fist connected with his jaw, resulting in a similar sound as Ari’s head snapped to the side at an ugly angle, blood flying from his mouth. For someone who’d lost as much blood as Shep had, he showed no signs of faltering. His anger fueled his drive to be there and bring this fucker to the ending he deserved.

Ari rotated his jaw from side to side as if testing it wasn’t broken, as Shep leaned down to say by his ear, “Give me a reason to punch it off its hinges, fucker.”

The dumb shit then angled his head to face Shep, his eyes wild as he faced off with King's number two—and his own choice of number two.

"You know, you and King were the easiest to predict out of the lot of you," Ari sneered, seeming to delight in his own downfall at this stage. "The fact you started fucking my number one target in bringing you assholes down was just icing on the cake."

He barely got the word *cake* out of his mouth before Shep was once again planting his fist in the corner of it.

Once for Wales.

Twice for the jungle.

And a third time, I was assuming, for Ari's bullet grazing his arm.

That was when King stepped in to pull Shep back, because there was no way in hell *I* was about to stop him.

"This could've ended so differently," King said, shaking his head. "You obviously have skills that could be put to better use. You could've been an asset—"

"If you weren't a fucking psycho who wanted us dead," I said as Ari spat blood out the corner of his mouth.

"Watching some asshole shoot your brother in cold blood will do that to you."

"He was stealing from us," King said in a tone so cold I was shocked icicles didn't form from the ceiling. "He threatened to expose Libertine—"

"*You*."

"—to the world. I couldn't let that happen. Not with everything we do. The people involved. You knew that and so did he. That's clear on that video. He knew you were both compromised, but you kept pushing."

"So it's my fault you put a bullet through his head?"

"It's your fault you put him in that position." King's eyes narrowed as he straightened his shoulders. "I take full responsibility for the life I took."

Ari scoffed again, but it was more like a gurgle at this stage. "That's just like you lot. Shoot first, deal with the consequences later, right, Shep? We wouldn't want America to discover their golden boy isn't so golden now, would we? What would they all think?"

"That he's a fucking hero." I gave a feral grin, moving up beside Shep. "I watched him blow your merc's head off. Nothing was hotter, or more heroic. Maybe I'll have him do the same to you."

"Just give me the gun," Shep growled, but King held his hand up.

“We never shoot first and deal later, or this conversation wouldn’t be happening,” King explained. “But I’m trying to understand why. Why play such a long, drawn-out game? Why not just come for me? I’m the one you want.”

“To *suffer*,” Ari gritted out. “I wanted you to feel the guilt of your brothers dying under your watch. Feel the pain of being so fucking wrong in how you judged them. Then it would be your turn.”

I crossed my arms over my chest. “Well, aren’t *you* in for a world of disappointment?”

“You fractured,” Ari said, shifting on his chair. “I saw them all scrambling to find you. Hell, Alessio is one encrypted code from short-circuiting his motherboard. That might be one of my finest legacies. Fucked him just hard enough to prove how useless he is.”

King grabbed a fistful of Ari’s hair and yanked his head back until the chair teetered on its hind legs. “He caught *you*, didn’t he?”

Ari’s lips curved into a sinister smile. “After a kidnapping and a shooting. That cloud has swallowed him whole. Killing me won’t change that.”

“But it sure is gonna feel good.” I moved in front of Ari’s seat and put a foot between his legs, slamming it back on all fours.

“Theo.” Shep moved in beside me, and I could hear the question in his voice: *Are you sure about this?* But the answer had never been clearer. This motherfucker was mine. He’d not only gone after my reputation and threatened my life, he’d shot Shep and planned to kill every single person I cared about.

There was no way I was letting anyone take this from me.

“Don’t tell me the prince is about to become the executioner,” Ari jeered, but little did he know who he was fucking with. I wasn’t known as the merciless, chaotic King for my cool, calm demeanor, and it was time to show Ari that.

“Unlike you,” I said, removing my cuff links—I slipped one into my pocket but kept the other one, with my initials, in my palm—“I don’t send others to do my dirty work.”

Ari’s smirk told me he didn’t believe me, but he would soon enough.

“Sure. That’s why Lachlan’s standing outside. Don’t forget, I know how you all work. Go get your guard dog, and let’s get this over with.”

I chuckled, the hollow, menacing sound foreign even to my own ears, as I began to roll my sleeves up. This fucker had no idea what was about to happen to him, but I did, and so did the two men beside me.

That was when King looked over at Shep, who gave a clipped nod.

“You got this, Theo?” King said as the two of them took a step back, but my eyes were locked in on the target, now eyeing me with a lot more trepidation than he had seconds ago.

Then I took hold of the small silver toggle of the cuff link and pulled until a long piece of wire stretched between my hands. As I wound the ends nice and tight and the wire pulled taut, I heard the door to the room open and then slam shut behind me, leaving me locked inside with the man who’d tried to kill me.

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SHEP

WE DIDN'T SLEEP that night. The events of the shooting and the aftermath with Ari had left us too raw, opening up the wounds of the last few weeks and how close we'd come to losing each other.

Theo hadn't said a word when he finally walked out of the room at Libertine last night, and I hadn't asked for details. I didn't need them. I just needed the relief I saw on Theo's face, along with the weight lifted from his shoulders, to know it was all over. The nightmare we'd been dealing with had finally ended.

It felt more than a little surreal, though, that we wouldn't be looking over our shoulders constantly. Or having to run away to a safe house in the middle of a jungle. Or hide away in my house…

Though the last didn't sound like a bad idea at all right then, as I lay back in Theo's arms on the couch, content to stay there forever. *Lucifer* played in the background, but neither of us had really been watching.

His lips were soft as he pressed them against my temple, and I closed my eyes. "How's your arm?"

"Never better."

He snorted. "Liar. I heard you moaning in your sleep."

"Maybe I was dreaming of you."

"Uh, I heard a whimper, so I sure as fuck hope not."

I chuckled, even though the reality was that my arm was stinging like hell and it was past time to pop a few pain relievers. Theo had called one of the physicians we had on staff to make a house call last night, and he'd had

to stitch me up pretty good. The wound would heal, but the most important thing was the bullet hadn't gotten Theo—or pierced any of my vital organs.

"How's *your* arm?" I said. "You took the weight of both of us when I tackled you."

Theo tightened his arms around me as if to prove a point. "Never better."

"Sure it is."

Theo's hand slid lower, beneath the throw blanket, his fingers sweeping over my hip, then down to the curve where hip met thigh. Not a grope, but something lazier. Intimate. Familiar. Like my body was his.

I inhaled slowly, heat stirring low in my stomach.

"If I wasn't okay, could I do this?" His hand drifted even lower, moving down between my thighs to cup my covered cock.

"Oh, you could. Doesn't mean you should," I said, even as I arched my hips up into his touch.

"Who says I shouldn't?" His fingers flexed, taking hold of me through my boxer briefs. "I'm a prince. I can do what I want."

Groaning, I put my hand over his, fully intending on pushing him away, since we both needed to take it easy, but the pressure of his touch felt too damn good. "A prince and a menace."

"*Your* menace," he said, his cock hardening against my back. "Don't forget, you asked for this."

"Because you kept throwing yourself at me."

"How the fuck could I not? Look at you." Theo's teeth grazed my naked shoulder as he withdrew his hand from beneath mine and slipped it under the waistband of my boxer briefs. His long fingers were cool against my skin, and when they wrapped around the base of my dick, my head fell back against his chest.

Any other protests I had died on my tongue. It felt too good, and I wasn't about to deny Theo anything.

As he began to stroke me to full mast, I tilted my head to the side, exposing my neck to him. He kissed his way along my shoulder, stopping to stuck the sensitive skin at the junction where it met my neck.

"You taste so good," he murmured, giving my dick a hard squeeze that had me gasping. "How about you just lie there and let me lick you head to toe?"

I moaned my approval, my eyes closing at the erotic sensations coursing through me from his hands and his mouth, and he'd only just begun touching me.

A deep, throaty chuckle met my ears as he shifted behind me, and I forced myself to sit up so he could stand.

His cock jutted out from his tight maroon boxer briefs as he stood up, his incredible body on full display for me. My gaze trailed down those powerful thighs and calves dusted with dark hair that he liked to wrap around my waist or use to propel himself deeper inside me. His corded arms, though still healing, were strong and defined, his chest proudly displayed, those abs begging for me to trace with my tongue.

But that face… *Fuck me*, that face. The hunger I felt just looking at Theo had me forgetting all about the pain in my arm as desire took hold, strong and unrepentant.

I ran my hand down the back of his thigh, pulling him closer, and he looked down at me with heavy-lidded eyes filled with desire.

"I want you." My voice came out in a breathy, needy whisper that had Theo cupping my face.

"You have me. Always."

He didn't make me beg, knowing exactly what I needed as he moved back onto the couch and then knelt between my thighs. He planted a soft kiss between my pecs and then began to make his way down, his lips never leaving my skin as they trailed down farther…farther…

Then—

Our phones buzzed on the coffee table at the same time.

I cursed. "Ignore it."

Theo lifted his head as they went off.

"No," I said quickly, sliding my fingers into his hair to guide him back to where I wanted him. "You better not stop."

He laughed softly, his breath warm on my skin. "Bossy tonight."

"You love it."

"I do." His lips brushed along the base of my stomach—

Buzz.

Buzz.

"Christ, our brothers are needy," Theo said, before nuzzling into the cropped curls and pressing a kiss there.

"So am I."

With the way our phones lit up in sync, it could only be the group text thread, and when it buzzed yet again, Theo sat up and snatched his phone off the table.

"Someone better be dying."

I shook my head. "Too soon."

He opened the thread and shared the screen.

LUCIEN

You two might want to check the news…

LACHLAN

You idiots are trending.

KING

Reminder: We have a "no fraternizing on red carpets during active gunfire" rule. Apparently we need a refresher.

BENOIT

Do we need to schedule a press conference or a wedding? Just checking.

ALESSIO

For the record, I had "they're fucking" on my bingo card a long time ago. They're way behind.

LACHLAN

Fuckin' hell, Cooper said, and I quote, "America is entering its Slutty Prince Era, and I, for one, support it."

I hate you both.

Theo clicked the link they sent, and it opened to an article with the headline:

Are America's Son and the Prince of Monaco More than Friends?

It was followed by a photo of the two of us on the red carpet what seemed to be moments after the shooting, with me cupping Theo's jaw as he looked up at me like…

Well, like he was completely, madly in love with me.

Theo glanced down at our hard-ons and back at the photo, a smirk on his lips. "More than friends, huh?"

"Theo…" My tone was a warning, all this teasing giving me some painful blue balls.

"I don't know," he said, turning his phone off and then slowly lowering himself back between my thighs again. "But let's find out."

He kissed the inside of my thigh and looked up at me with heavy-lidded eyes before taking off his boxer briefs, followed by mine. Then his fingers wrapped around my cock again and he lowered his mouth over it with agonizing slowness.

"Fuck, Theo—"

His hand tightened around me as his lips teased at the head of my rock-hard erection. My breathing was already uneven and he hadn't even swallowed me yet. I found myself reaching down, threading my fingers through his hair, lifting my hips to chase his mouth.

I grunted when he pulled back, the teasing fucker. "You're gonna kill me."

"You survived yesterday," he murmured, his breath on my dick making me shiver. "You'll survive this."

My head fell back against the pillow as I loosened my hold on his hair, letting him control the pace, since he was the one who'd started this. His tongue dragging down my length was achingly slow at first, like he was drawing this out—or maybe just allowing himself the time to enjoy licking me the way he'd said he wanted. There was still a hungry undercurrent, but it didn't feel desperate the way it did before last night. Like now we were safe, finally, and we could rediscover each other in a way we almost didn't get to…

And then he was sucking me, greedy pulls that were warm and devastating, and fuck, I was losing every ounce of restraint I pretended to have. If his mouth wasn't so busy, he would've teased me mercilessly for the sounds he was drawing out of me.

With my cock down his throat, he hummed around me, the vibration shooting straight up my spine, and my thigh jerked like my body wasn't

mine anymore.

“Oh God. Theo—” My voice cracked, and he lifted his head just enough to smirk against my skin.

“There something you need, Shep?”

“Yes—don’t stop.” I lifted my hips, chasing his mouth, and he sucked me deep inside, slow and intentional. My eyes practically rolled to the back of my head as every muscle in my body wound tight.

He knew exactly what he was doing.

He always did.

“Theo,” I said, breathless as I felt myself begin to tip toward the edge, “I’m close.”

I was seconds away from coming, *seconds*, when Theo pulled off me with a slow drag that nearly killed me. I choked on a curse, staring up at him, his hair tousled from my fingers, lips wet, and eyes dark with the kind of intent that promised I wasn’t done suffering.

He crawled up my body, slow and predatory, and straddled my hips. His hands traced up my stomach, my chest, and up my neck to hold my face.

“You wanna come?”

“You have no idea.”

“Oh, I do.” He kissed me slow and deep, letting me taste myself on his tongue. “I’m just deciding how I want you.”

A shiver of anticipation ran through me so hard I couldn’t disguise it, and when his name fell off my lips again, his mouth crashed back down on mine.

“Relax,” he whispered. “I’ll take care of you, *mon amour*.”

My heart skipped a beat as he reached for the lube in one of the coffee table drawers. He got his fingers nice and slick and then shifted down just enough to kiss my stomach while his hand slid lower. He coated me in slow, lazy strokes, dipping his finger just past my entrance before pulling it back out, tormenting me once again, and I moaned.

“Good?” he asked, as if he didn’t already know what every sound I made meant.

“You’re teasing me.”

“I’m enjoying you. There’s a difference.”

“I think it’s both.”

A hint of mischief swirled in his eyes, his pupils already blown to high hell from arousal as he positioned his cock at my hole. I clenched at the

couch cushions in anticipation, widening my thighs for an easy slide, and then I felt it, pressure as he punched inside, breaching the entrance and thrusting inside me inch by inch.

This time it was Theo who cursed, alternating between English and French as he continued to push inside. The fullness of him as he bottomed out, filling me so completely, had me losing my breath.

He stayed right there, shivering against me as he gave me time to adjust to him. “That’s it. Feel me.”

I grabbed his hips, not to control what was about to happen, but just to hold on. His skin burned under my palms as he rocked into me once, and my vision went white.

“Oh, you like that.” There was a dangerous curl to his mouth when I could see him again, and I couldn’t find the words, nodding instead for him to do it again.

He did, pulling out of me almost all the way before shoving back in with more control than I would’ve thought possible for how far gone I was. But then his breath hitched and he tilted his head back, exposing the long line of his throat and making him look like a man untamed.

“You’re incredible,” I said in awe. My hands went to his waist, my fingers digging into his skin as he looked back down at me. “So fucking perfect.”

Theo leaned forward, bracing his hands on either side of my head so our chests pressed together. He continued to thrust inside me, his pace demanding but so fucking delicious.

“I want to see you lose it,” he whispered against my mouth. “Let me.”

His cock grazed my p-spot, and I choked out, “I already am.”

He kissed me repeatedly as he drove into me, each one pulling a sound from my throat I couldn’t control.

Theo pulled back just enough to look at me while he moved, and when he changed angles, his movements faltered.

“*Putain,*” he said on a gasp as I wrapped my legs around him tight, forcing him to get as deep as he could, and that was when he broke. His nails dug into my shoulders as he thrust into me harder, faster, losing the last of his control.

Watching him unravel? Feeling it? It was enough to destroy me.

But then I heard him, his voice needy and his hips moving desperately over mine. “Shep, I’m gonna—”

“Come for me,” I said on a growl. “Come *with* me.”

Theo’s entire body went tight, his back arching as the sound he made punched straight through every defense I had left. I could feel the rush of his orgasm filling me, driving me straight over the edge as heat tore through me. My dick exploded in a white-hot jet between us that had my head spinning as I held tight to him.

Theo collapsed onto my chest, both our bodies shaking with aftershocks, his spent cock still lingering inside me. I held him as our breathing synced, as the sweat cooled on our skin. His forehead pressed into my neck, and I knew without a shadow of a doubt I’d never been this fucking satisfied in my life.

Finally, Theo spoke, his voice hoarse and a bit smug.

“Well,” he murmured, kissing my throat, “guess that settles the article.”

I huffed out a weak, wrecked laugh, brushing my fingers through his hair. “Definitely more than friends.”

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THEO

ONLY A FRESHLY-showered-and-in-a-low-slung-towel Shep could look so damn good after the last twenty-four hours. Even I felt like fresh hell—physically, anyway—and he'd been the one to get shot at.

He ran a hand through his hair, slicking it back from his face, and I didn't bother hiding my open stare. I didn't have to. I could look and touch all I wanted, which was all I'd had the capacity for after the night with Ari. I didn't want to talk to anyone. See anyone. Do anything other than spend every second with the man I'd almost lost.

There wasn't an ounce of remorse in me whenever I thought about what I'd done the minute the door shut, locking me in with Ari. He'd deserved every painful second he got in the end, and I'd taken each bit of rage and fear he'd instilled and given it back tenfold.

I wasn't sorry. I wouldn't ever be.

Because the man slipping into a pair of navy boxer briefs and then covering that sweet ass with jeans was here with me, safe and mine.

And I was his.

If anyone tried to interfere with that, I had a wire-wrapped cuff link with their name on it.

"That scowl better not be for me," Shep said as he lobbed the damp towel at my chest.

Lost in my thoughts, I hadn't even realized I was pulling a face and quickly smoothed it out. "Well, it was rude to put on clothes and ruin my view. How about you take them off?"

“You said we were out of coffee.”

“So?”

“So have you ever had the pleasure of dealing with Prince Rinaldi before he has caffeine?” he teased.

“Are you saying I’m a nightmare?” I feigned shock and horror, which had Shep chuckling and leaning in to press a kiss to my lips.

“It means I plan to keep my guy happy by running out to get some.”

I tsked and drew him closer by the waist of his jeans. “I’d be happy with you naked and spread beneath me…”

“You say that now, but in a couple of hours I’ll get terror Theo.”

This time I didn’t have to feign anything. “You little fucker—”

“You didn’t say it was so little last night. In fact, I think I recall hearing, ‘*Oh mon Dieu*, Shep, your cock is so huge—”

I burst into laughter at his fucked pronunciation, but couldn’t deny it was kind of endearing to hear him try. And he wasn’t wrong.

“You’re right, I did say that. Much more eloquently, but I did say it.”

“And if you don’t mind, I’d like to spend the day with *that* Theo, not one who is cranky due to lack of caffeine.”

“Cranky?” I arched a brow. “I suppose that’s a step up from a reckless, chaotic nightmare.”

Shep’s lips curved against mine. “You’re still all of those things, but now that I know how to avoid them, I’m going to do my best to make sure I do.”

“Fair enough,” I said, and grabbed my sunglasses off the coffee table. “But you better include a pastry in that order too.”

Shep laced his fingers with mine and drew me into the elevator. “How about I include two?”

I slid my hands up Shep’s chest and pressed a kiss to his lips, taking advantage of the quick trip down to the ground floor, knowing the second we stepped outside any kind of touching would have to wait until we got home.

There’d been a couple of photos taken at the gala of Shep diving in to protect me in the heat of the moment that had garnered some mild speculation over whether there was more between us than America’s golden boy stepping up and being a hero.

For now, though, it seemed the press was happy to run with the fact there’d been no casualties, and were busy covering who the shooter might

be and where he'd disappeared to, but, um…good luck with that. They weren't going to find shit.

As the elevator opened and we headed toward the door, I slipped my sunglasses on and prepared to face the morning. What I wasn't prepared for, however, the second Shep pulled open the door, was to be met with a dozen or more paparazzi who instantly perked up like wolves catching a scent.

The familiar sound of cameras whirred and flashed in front of us as the crowd converged.

"Prince Rinaldi, are you and Shepard more than friends?"

"Shepard? Did the prince stay at your place last night?"

"Are you two dating? Or just 'comforting' one another?"

Oh, we were comforting each other, all right, all night long. And had it been up to me, I would've told that nosy reporter exactly that, because, well, had they *seen* Shep?

But *he* clearly had other ideas.

Shep's hand clamped around my wrist and instantly pulled me back. He slammed the door shut on all their stunned faces, and luckily for us, the lobby door was wooden.

"Bill?" Shep said to the doorman in that all-too-serious tone that was just downright sexy. "Make sure no one gets inside, would you?"

"Yes, sir."

Shep turned to me, a frown pulled between his brows, his lips drawn tight, and the expression was so damn cute I couldn't help but laugh. "Why so serious, Mr. Winchester? Never been caught doing the walk of shame?"

"I'm not doing the walk of shame now."

"Okay then, never been caught in a compromising position?"

"I'm not in one of those either."

I leaned up and put my lips to his ear. "Do you want to be?"

He leaned back, and that frown became even more pronounced. "Would you be serious?"

"I am very serious." I waggled my brows. "Just tell me how you want me."

"Did you not just see what I did? There has to be a reporter from every news outlet standing outside my home."

"And?"

"*And* they all think you spent the night with me."

“I *did* spend the night with you.” When Shep just stared at me, I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to get my coffee, am I?”

“I don’t think it would be very smart.”

“Because you’re worried about the press.”

Shep snorted. “Aren’t you? If your family finds out—”

“They’d be annoyed but not shocked,” I pointed out, because it was true.

Of all the people I’d been caught in the tabloids with, Shepard O’Neil Winchester the third was a top-tier choice, and my parents would definitely approve—I thought.

However, there were protocols, and they would be disappointed I hadn’t come to them first.

Dieu. I hated being responsible.

“But you’re right. We should probably tell them first.”

I could hear the reluctance in my voice, but it was what it was. The fact remained that we were two public figures and shit like this happened. I just hadn’t been expecting it to happen with Shep—yet. We’d talked about doing it, going public with our relationship, but on our terms, and now here was a bunch of press littering his doorstep. And honestly, if I’d seen him throw himself on top of me, I’d be more than a little curious too.

I reached for Shep’s hand and laced our fingers, then started back toward the elevator. “It’s fine. You’ll just have to deal with Terror Theo today.”

But Shep didn’t move, tugging me back to him with a determined look on his face that had me wondering what the hell it meant.

“No,” he said. “I’m not hiding you or us. We’re not doing that.”

A slow smile curled up the corners of my mouth and I moved back toward him. “Oh, we’re not, huh?”

He shook his head. “No. Hope you’re good with that.”

Was he kidding? Anyone would be fucking thrilled to show off Shep as the man in their life, and somehow that lucky bastard was me.

I’d apologize to my parents later. Better to ask for forgiveness than permission, wasn’t that the saying?

“You better be sure,” I said, stepping in so close our bodies touched, something that still sent electric shocks through me. “Because once it’s out there, no take-backs. No trade-ins for a newer model. Or one less chaotic.”

He grinned, and that white smile was mesmerizing. “Theo.”

Putain. The way he said my name should be illegal in both our countries. It was so sexy and so possessive that it was all he had to say for me to know there was no turning back now—for either of us.

He brought our joined hands up between us, pressed a kiss to my knuckles, and winked. “Let’s give them something to talk about.” Then he looked up at the doorman. “I’ll get it, Bill.”

Bill nodded and stepped out of the way, hiding his smile as we headed for the exit. Shep tightened his fingers around mine, refusing to let go as he pulled open the door, letting me step through first.

The flashes were even more blinding this time around, and I lowered my sunglasses again, though they couldn’t hide my Cheshire grin. Somehow there were even more paparazzi swarming on the sidewalk than five minutes ago. What had they done, called all their friends?

The shouts and questions began before the door shut behind us, and as we moved through the crowd side by side, we both waved but kept our heads down.

“Are you two confirming you’re an item?”

“Shepard, what does your father have to say about this relationship?”

“How long have you been a couple?”

“Will there be a royal wedding?”

They followed us down the block with their questions and cameras, and for the first time in my life, I didn’t feel annoyed or anxious about it all. Shep’s hand was firm, unwavering, much like the man himself, and having him beside me, as my partner and my lover, gave me an unfamiliar sense of peace. *That* was new, but not at all unwelcome, and I found myself looking at him while we waited at the crosswalk for the light to change.

He looked back at me, his eyes an even lighter shade of ice blue in the sun. Pride swirled in their depths, and I squeezed his hand.

I knew exactly what he was feeling. He’d told me before how much he hated to hide in a relationship, to be someone’s secret, and now here he was, loud and proud in announcing us as a couple to the world.

Without thinking, I brought our joined fingers up to my mouth, kissing his hand the same way he’d just done mine in the lobby. It garnered a genuine smile from my man even as the crowd around us went wild.

The light changed and we crossed the street, the horde following as we headed to the corner coffee shop. The message between us was silent but strong as we stared at one another: *Let them talk. I’m not hiding you.*

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25

SHEP

"CAN WE BOTH agree this is absolutely ridiculous?" Theo took a drag of his kretek and blew it out with the wind where we stood on the balcony of my family's home in Delaware.

To say the photos of us splashed on the front of every newspaper had gone wild over the last week was an understatement. I knew there'd be some kind of response—I wasn't stupid. Theo and I had both been in this game as public figures our whole lives, so we knew how crazy it could get.

This, however, was on a different level. And it'd been enough for our families to call a meeting to figure out how to move forward.

Less than half an hour in, Theo needed a smoke break, and I grabbed a full glass of wine on the way out the door.

Theo leaned against the rail, looking out over the vast lake my parents had built this property on after my father left office. It was quiet, the only house around for miles, almost too serene after the hustle and bustle of the city. Some might say it was peaceful, and I supposed it was, though the scene inside had been a bunch of voiced opinions on the best way to handle the public scrutiny. Along with admonishments for springing such a huge surprise on the families without advance notice.

I unbuttoned my suit jacket and sighed as I leaned back against the white banister. "I think they've forgotten we're forty and entirely capable of managing this."

"Forty? Speak for yourself, old man—you've still got three years on me."

I arched a brow. “Old man? You really wanna go there?”

Theo shot me a wink as he blew smoke over his shoulder. “What can I say? I’ve got a thing for hot older guys.”

“Call me old one more time—”

He pushed off the rail and stepped toward me. “Did I also mention incredibly sexy?”

“Not soon enough.”

“Smart, sexy, protective…mine.”

I slipped an arm around his waist and pulled him in the remaining few inches. “I feel like a damn teenager.”

“You definitely have the sexual appetite of one,” Theo said, then leaned up to nip at my lower lip. But not even his flirting could get me out of my surly mood.

“What grown-ass adults get summoned to their parents’ house to discuss their dating schedules and relationship intentions?”

“Listen, if you sleep with a prince,” Theo said in the most uppity tone I’d ever heard, “then you have to answer to the Crown.”

I snorted. “Does that include getting me on my knees, Your Highness?”

“Your *Serene* Highness.” He grinned up at me, and I stole the kretek from his fingers and took a drag. I hadn’t smoked since dabbling in college, but this situation was driving me to.

The clove cigarette was sweet and spicy and familiar from tasting it on Theo’s tongue. It made me crave more of his mouth, but now wasn’t the time or place, not when Amaya, the royal family’s manager, stuck her head out the door.

“Do you two think you could join us to wrap this up soon?”

I appreciated the fact that she didn’t seem to sugarcoat things, which meant maybe we’d all come to an agreement before Theo and I decided to strangle everyone instead.

I put the kretek back between Theo’s full lips, and he took a long drag before stamping it out.

As we headed back inside, I quickly checked the phone in my pocket, since it’d been vibrating nonstop and I needed to set it to silent.

“Oh Jesus,” I muttered as I opened the home screen. The message thread with our brothers had over fifty unread texts, something that was unusual if there wasn’t a crisis.

Once I clicked on them, though, I immediately regretted it.

Did Shep get the "Royal Approval"?

Were you given the key to Theo's chastity belt?

Will you be given a chaperone now that you're dating an actual prince?

Did they assign you Secret Service yet?

The questions were obnoxious as hell, and while I wasn't about to feed their nosiness with a reply, I was going to ask about that last one. It was one thing for our families to be concerned for our public image and welfare, but if my father thought for one second he was going to have me tailed like he did back when he was in office, he could forget it.

"Oh good, there you are." *Speak of the devil.*

Shepard O'Neil Winchester the second came over to where Theo and I had just stepped back inside his study that overlooked the lake. The wood paneling on the walls gave the room a warm, rich, masculine feel, and with the whiskey flowing and the wine being poured, it was the perfect backdrop to discuss my future—*not*.

"Listen, Dad—"

"I know that tone," my father said as he came over to clap me on the shoulder. "But no need to worry yourself. We all think this relationship is… wonderful."

"We weren't worried," I said, a frown pulling between my brows. There was nothing I hated more than being treated like a child. "But we do think it's important you're all aware of it."

"How magnanimous of you, son."

"I thought so."

Theo's mother, Jacqueline, offered up a smile as she took a sip of her wine. "I think what your father meant to say, Shep, is that we're thrilled the two of you have found one another. We always knew you were friends, but this? This is just lovely."

Theo turned a saccharine-sweet smile my way. "*Oui, c'est tellement adorable*."

It took everything I had not to roll my eyes, because the last word I'd ever use to describe either one of us was that. But, not about to offend Theo's mother, I aimed my friendliest smile in her direction.

"It was a surprise to us too," I said, as Theo took my hand in his.

"Why don't you tell them how it all started?" he said, a mischievous light twinkling in his eyes. "It was at Jean's wedding."

I was going to kill him.

“Really?” Jacqueline sat forward on the couch. “Wait a second? Did I…? Was it because I asked you to check on him? Did I play a part in this?”

“*Oui*.” Theo nodded and cozied up into my side. “That was the exact moment I realized how much I enjoyed Shep’s…company.”

Jacqueline playfully nudged her husband. “Didn’t I tell you something was different about them at the ceremony for the museum?” She beamed at us once again. “A mother can tell these things.”

“That she can,” my mom spoke up, bringing Theo and me fresh glasses of whiskey. “And I have to admit, I’ve never seen you look happier, Shep.”

I took the tumbler from her and felt her silent show of support when she brushed her fingers over the backs of mine.

That was my mother’s superpower. The art of subtlety. People always assumed I got my calm and logic from my father’s side of the family, when really it was this beautiful lady right here who’d taught me the true meaning of grace under fire.

Cynthia O’Neil Winchester had been a beloved first lady to her country, revered as both a fashion icon and the rock to her powerful husband. My parents were viewed as one of the most influential couples in the world, and a lot of that was due to my mother’s eloquence under pressure.

“Thanks, Mom. I *am* happy. Happier than I’ve ever been.”

“Good,” she said, then looked to Theo. “Because friendship is what makes a relationship last. It makes the strongest foundation. Wouldn’t you agree, Shepard?”

“That I would,” my father said, taking her hand and guiding her over to sit opposite Theo’s parents. “But their relationship isn’t the issue we’re here to discuss today.”

It wasn’t? Well, that was good. But if it wasn’t our relationship that had them all calling for a meeting, then what?

“This attempted shooting last week…”

Oh, right. With Ari well and truly out of our lives, I hadn’t given any more thought to it. But as far as the public was aware—including our parents—the threat hadn’t been neutralized. We should probably talk to Alessio about that, make sure that word got out to the public that the threat had been contained.

“It’s over,” I said, leading Theo to one of two clubman chairs at the far end of the room, “and we’re all fine.”

“You were *shot*, Shep,” my mother pointed out. “That’s not even close to fine.”

“He just means that he’s doing well,” Theo interjected, leaning over to pat my leg. “Plus, I’ve been taking good care of him.”

“Which is all good and wonderful,” my father said. “But the timing of this little announcement you decided to spring on the world is concerning.”

“It’s really not a problem, Dad.”

“I agree, because I’ve decided to give you a couple of Secret Service agents.”

Oh my God, that *was* what this was about. My brothers had called it. My father wanted to assign us a protection detail.

“Absolutely not,” I said, much firmer than even I’d expected.

“Shep?”

Yeah, I knew that tone. It was the one my father used when he knew I was hiding something from him.

“You still have a threat—”

“Do I?”

The entire room fell silent. So silent you could hear a pin drop as my father’s eyes locked with mine over his tumbler.

“Fuck.”

“Don’t ask if you don’t want to know.”

“But—”

“I’m forty years old, Dad. I can look after myself and my man.” Not that Theo had needed my assistance. Not when armed with his favorite set of cuff links.

“So for now you’re…safe?”

“We are.”

My father was nobody’s fool and knew exactly what I was telling him, and judging by Prince Louis’s—Theo’s father’s—solemn expression, I had a feeling he could read between the lines too.

“But we thank you for the offer,” Theo said before looking over at his dad. “There’s just no need to put any kind of bodyguard on us. As you can see, I’m out of hiding now, and the danger has passed.”

“You’re certain of that?” Prince Louis said.

Theo brought his glass to his lips, took a sip, and let free a smile just this side of sinister. “I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

Louis reached for his wife's hand and gave it a quick squeeze of reassurance, and I wondered if, like my father, the prince knew what his son—what *I*—was capable of when it came to protecting ourselves and our loved ones.

"Very well, then—we'll trust you have this handled."

I gave a curt nod and reached for Theo's hand, and as he interlaced our fingers, a bright smile lit his mother's beautiful face.

"Will you come to Monaco soon? The family is going to want to formally meet you, Shep, and we can't wait to show you off."

"He's not a show pony, Mom."

"Of course not. But he's part of our family and we want to introduce him to the world."

"I'm pretty sure they already know him."

"And *I'm* pretty sure you're going to want to let me do this. Since you didn't tell me before you told said world."

It took everything I had not to snort at the sheepish expression that crossed Theo's face, because I don't think I'd ever seen someone put him so firmly in his place.

"*Oui*, Mother. We will make arrangements as soon as we're able."

"Now that's what I like to hear."

I turned to see my mother watching the two of us, her heart in her eyes, her joy evident in her soft smile as she leaned into my father's side.

That was what I'd always wanted—a love like theirs, and as I brought Theo's hand to mine and pressed a kiss to his knuckles, I knew I'd finally found it.

"You wouldn't by chance have enough food for two extra tonight, would you, Mom?"

She hadn't asked us, but the pleased expression that lit her face told me how much it meant to her that I wanted to stay, that I wanted them to get to know Theo and me as a couple, and that we wanted our families to become closer beyond planning for the next crisis.

"We sure do."

I looked at Theo to see him nodding his approval. "Then why don't we go and set another two seats?" I said.

Theo got to his feet and rubbed at his belly. "Sounds like a plan. I'm starving."

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THEO

"IS IT JUST me, or have we been summoned an awful lot lately?" I lifted my arm to scan my tracker on the panel that led us down from the main Libertine building to the underground where only the seven of us roamed. The lock clicked free, and when the door yawned open wide enough to let one of us through, I gestured for Shep to go first.

We'd only just gotten back from Delaware last night, only to have King request our presence at Libertine tonight. No doubt it had something to do with the amount of press we'd been receiving and how it would only burn the organization somehow, blah blah blah. I was prepared for whatever lashing we were about to get and would take it on the chin. There was no way in hell Shep and I were hiding each other, and if that was a problem, we'd deal with it. But the secretive shit was just not going to fly, something our families realized during our meeting yesterday.

"At least we'll have a few days to ourselves after this," Shep said, but when I groaned, he spun around. "No. What does that mean?"

I sighed. "Jean will be back from his honeymoon tomorrow."

"So?"

"So my older brother has requested my presence in Monaco."

"Why?"

"Why do you think? To tell me what a terrible job I did in his place. How I'll never be capable of running a country when I canceled appearances—"

“What the fuck? Did he miss the memo that someone tried to kill you outside the soccer match?”

“Just another Tuesday for us royals.” I winked and took his hand, leading us down the tunnel that led to the heart of our organization.

“So you have to go? He can’t just FaceTime you?”

The put-out look on Shep’s face was so damn hot I pulled him in close and kissed that frown right off his lips.

“Aww. Gonna miss me? You can come with.”

“I can’t. I’m meeting with Cooper tomorrow about the magazine feature, remember?”

“Lachlan’s letting his man off his leash to work with you? Imagine that.” I slipped my hands under Shep’s suit jacket to run them over his warm body and then kissed him again. “Guess that means we’ll have to make up for lost time when I get back.”

“Now’s as good a time as any.” Shep licked inside my mouth, that teasing tongue instantly grabbing my attention as he backed me up against the cave wall.

“*Putain oui*.” It’d been a hot minute since we’d had a quickie somewhere illicit, and though this wasn’t the right time or place, I wasn’t about to say no. Hell, I’d never say no to him, and I’d barely tugged Shep’s shirt from his pants when I heard someone clear their throat.

“Think you can do that on your own time, *mes chéris*?” Benoit said, appearing in front of us, a wicked smile curling his mouth. “We’re all waiting.”

I pulled back from Shep to say, “All?”

Benoit nodded. “Everyone’s here.”

“Shit.” Shep let me go and tucked his shirt back into the front of his pants, though there was no hiding his semi-erect cock. Or mine.

“You really didn’t have to call a meeting to give us shit,” I said as we got ourselves together and followed Benoit farther underground. “We got your texts.”

“*A key to Theo’s chastity belt*.” Shep smirked. “That was very creative.”

“Yes, well, you did so enjoy giving the rest of us hell about our relationships, we figured it was only fair.” Benoit reached the entrance first and pulled open the massive door that led inside. Shep and I stepped through—then stopped dead in our tracks.

The scene before us wasn't one we'd ever seen at Libertine, at least not down here among the group of us. Candles flickered as the only light in the room, along the immaculately set table that each of our brothers were seated at.

Shep's voice was low as he leaned in to me. "This looks like an intervention."

I scanned each of my brothers' faces, trying to get a read on them. "If someone starts with 'we're only concerned,' I'm flipping the goddamn table."

"Please don't," Lucien said dryly as he swirled his glass of red wine between his fingers. "It's an antique."

Shep gave me a *here we fucking go* look and we started toward the two empty seats waiting for us. It didn't escape my notice that we were all seated across from each other without King taking his spot at the head of the table. I wondered what that meant, but I didn't have a chance to ask, because King cleared his throat, gathering everyone's attention.

He looked at where Shep and I still stood, and gestured toward the chairs. "Sit. We should eat before the food gets cold."

"Wait, so this is a…dinner?" I said. It wasn't a first for us to get together for meals in the real world, but down here? "Why?"

"I thought we should all have a talk," King said. "About us."

He wasn't staring at me and Shep when he said it, but looking around the table at every one of us. Curiosity had me exchanging glances with Shep, but we both took our seats as Lachlan spoke up.

"We've been fractured. Distracted. And some of us"—he shot a meaningful look at King—"let paranoia get the better of us."

"We owe you an apology, Theo," Alessio said.

I froze. *That* was what this was all about? An apology? I'd garnered one from King, and that was all I'd needed. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat.

"You don't have to—"

"We do," King said firmly. "We should've trusted you."

Lachlan nodded beside him. "Fear makes people do stupid shit. Even us. Hell, *especially* us."

"We treated you like you haven't spent years at our sides as our loyal brother and friend, and that was wrong," Lucien added.

"Theo…I built Libertine on loyalty," King said. "And then I went and doubted yours. I'm not proud of that."

“None of us are,” Benoit interjected.

I felt like I couldn’t breathe. Even when Shep’s hand squeezed my thigh in support under the table.

I swallowed and looked down at the scars on my wrist and forearm and shook my head.

“No, I…I get why you doubted me. I was reckless. Unavailable. Distracted. And yeah, I held myself apart from you and kept a secret. But I never turned on any of you. I would never.”

“Can you forgive us?” Lucien asked softly.

“Can you forgive *me*?” I countered.

King lifted his wine glass. “To Theo. Still one of ours.”

One by one, my brothers and Shep joined King in his toast, and I realized my hand was shaking as I lifted my glass. Again Shep squeezed my thigh, a soft smile on his face.

We were good. All of us.

Well, that might be stretching it if I was reading Alessio’s tight smile right. He still looked like a man dealing with internal demons none of us knew of. We’d need to keep an eye on that. But for now I was happy to bask in the camaraderie I’d missed with my brothers. The ease of being around people who knew me almost as well as I knew myself.

“So,” Lucien said, a twinkle in his eye, “should I let Kai know there’ll be another royal wedding in his future soon?”

I scoffed and lifted my glass to him in mock salute. “Here’s an idea: how about you stop giving us shit and give that poor boy the wedding he so desperately deserves?”

Shep chuckled. “I do seem to remember the hearts in Kai’s eyes as he looked on wistfully at Jean’s wedding, wondering when *his* prince would make an honest man out of him.”

“Okay, okay, I deserve that. But for your information—”

“Oh, *oui*,” Benoit said, propping his chin on his hands and batting his lashes. “Tell us your plans. I just know they’ll be romantic.”

“Can he tell us while we eat?” Lachlan complained, and when King gave the go-ahead, we all removed the silver domes over our meals. “Lamb roast? Damn, Theo, you should put King in the doghouse more often.”

“He didn’t put me there,” King said, as one by one we started reaching for the salt and pepper, mint jelly, and gravy. “I put myself there. A nice dinner is the least I could do.”

“Don’t think that means we’ve forgotten what you were going to say, *mon cher*,” Benoit said to Lucien, as he topped up his glass with some red wine. “Tell us all how you’re going to sweep that sweet man of yours off his feet.”

As Lucien launched into detail about the plans he had in store for Kai, I was happy to relax into the conversation and for the first time—in a *long* time—not be the center of it.

It was nice to finally enjoy a meal with my friends and not worry that one of them thought I was betraying the group. Even better was sitting at this table with Shep at my side, able to touch and look at him whenever I wanted without hiding just how fucking good he made me feel.

Damn, how did I get so lucky? I’d somehow managed to make Shepard O’Neil Winchester the third fall in love with me. *Me*. The most chaotic, reckless pain in the ass he knew. Guess he just needed a challenge.

The thought made me smirk, and he must’ve caught it out the corner of his eye, because he turned to face me.

“What’s that grin about?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Shep leaned over and pressed his mouth against mine, then whispered, “Sure you don’t.”

I licked at my lips, tasting the mint he’d put on his lamb, then shrugged. “I was just thinking about how far we’ve come in a few months. And the fact you find me completely irresistible now.”

“Is that right?”

“You’re the one kissing me, Mr. Winchester.”

As Shep’s lips tugged up on one side, I noticed Alessio’s attention fixed on us. His brow furrowed, his eyes darker than usual, and he quickly turned away.

“I’m gonna head out, if that’s cool,” he said as he pushed to his feet, and everyone stopped talking around the table. “Glad everything worked out, Theo. It’s good to have you back.”

He grabbed up his plate and wine, and before I could tell him I was glad to be back, he turned on his heel and headed out of the room. I spun back to face the rest of my brothers, whose eyes were on the empty doorway. As Alessio’s sudden departure set in, I looked over at King.

“So, um, what are we going to do about that?”

King frowned and shook his head. “Honestly? I’d been hoping he’d come around once everything was sorted. When he found Ari.”

“Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to happen.” Lachlan looked at Alessio’s vacant seat. “And to peace out before we all go and see Father Vitale? That’ll be the second time he’s skipped out on our visits.”

Putain, that wasn’t like Alessio at all. If there was one thing he did religiously, it was to make sure we all showed up for our monthly confession. Unless, of course, one happened to be in hiding somewhere in a Brazilian jungle.

“Maybe I should go and have a talk to him,” Shep suggested, but King reached out to put a hand over his.

“Give him a minute. Let’s finish dinner, and if he doesn’t come back, then go.”

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SHEP

WHEN ALESSIO DIDN'T return to dinner, I went looking for him. He wasn't hard to find, holed up in his office surrounded by more gadgets, computers, and screens than I'd ever seen in my life. I didn't know what half of them did, but that was where we'd always relied on Alessio. He always got us through any storm, any difficulty, any situation for which we'd need his expertise, but looking at him now where he stood adjusting one of his monitors, his food untouched, maybe that was the problem.

Maybe we relied on him too much. Put him under too much pressure.

He was, after all, only human.

Something I was sure he was kicking himself for as he glanced over his shoulder at me and went back to what he was doing.

"Dinner over already?"

"Just starting on dessert. Wanna join us?"

I knew what the answer would be, but I wanted him to know that I was here. *We* were here. His actions weren't going unnoticed.

"I just got in a new shipment of toys from Stavros, so I need to get those linked to our systems and filed away."

Not only was Dimitri Stavros the man in Benoit's life, he was also an arms dealer that kept us supplied with all the latest and greatest weapons and tech. I could understand that being like fucking Christmas to someone like Alessio, but it seemed like an excuse as a distraction.

"That could wait until after the tiramisu, don't you think?"

He didn’t answer, popping open a steel case and carefully picking up a tiny object that I had no doubt did something bigger than it appeared to. Like picking up a conversation miles away or shattering bulletproof glass.

“Alessio?”

“Sorry, I’m busy.”

“Too busy for dessert and bottomless whiskey?”

“That a problem?”

I crossed my arms and stepped farther inside, giving him a clear indication I wasn’t leaving. “Yeah. Maybe it is. Seems like King wanted tonight to be about the brotherhood, but you’re hiding in here, not eating and pretending like you’re okay.”

“Jesus, Shep, I *am* okay.”

“I don’t think you are.”

“How the hell would you know?”

“Because I know you, and you’re a sarcastic shit, not a combative ass. Talk to me.”

He shrugged, his hair falling like a curtain around his face and blocking me out. “There’s nothing to say.”

“Bullshit. You’re beating yourself up over this, and you’ve got to stop. You worked it out—”

“After how many fucking close calls?” Alessio snapped, whirling around to face me. “We could’ve lost you both, and it would’ve been my fault.”

“What? Alessio, no—”

“I couldn’t find him, Shep.” Those dark eyes were wide and pained. “You all depend on me with your lives, and I couldn’t fucking crack it. Couldn’t find him until it was almost too late.”

“It was an impossible task, but somehow you got there. *You* did that. No one’s all-powerful, but fuck, man, you’re pretty goddamn close.”

Alessio turned away, running his hand through his dark, wavy hair that was down and hanging loose at his shoulders. He’d always been a built guy, with biceps that could smash a watermelon on a curl, but I could tell he’d lost some weight with the way his usually fitted t-shirt sat a little loose and his jeans hung low on his hips.

“I let you all down,” he said quietly. “I’m sorry for that.”

“You have nothing to be sorry about. But maybe hearing that from someone other than me would help you accept that.”

Alessio's shoulders stiffened. "No."

"I get it," I said, moving a little closer. "Confession isn't exactly my idea of a good time either, but when I missed it last month, I realized how important it was to me. Especially with what we do. I would've given anything out there in that jungle to have Father Vitale to talk to—"

"Yeah, well, that's you," Alessio snapped. "The last thing I need right now is his lofty judgment."

He turned and reached for the bottle of whiskey on his desk, and when he pulled the cork and brought it to his lips, forgoing a glass, I knew things were much worse than I'd suspected.

One of Alessio's hard and fast rules for us was a visit with the reverend once a month. It had always been non-negotiable. But this would now be the second time he skipped out on his own mandate if what King said was true, and the added hostility in his tone and stance told me the same story.

"I hardly think he'd judge you. The whole reason for confession is to allow you to unburden yourself to one who is there to offer guidance."

"I don't *want* his fucking guidance."

"Okay, but maybe you need it."

Alessio aimed a fulminating look in my direction, and that was when I decided to pull out the only other weapon in my arsenal—guilt.

"How many times have you made one of us go and speak to the father when we didn't want to? And in the end you were always right. He always makes us feel better."

"Yeah? Well, what makes one person feel good can drive another to drink." He swung the bottle between his fingers, and quick as a snake I whipped it out of his hand and reached for the cork.

"You're coming with us," I told him. "Even if I have to drag you there myself."

It was that exact moment Theo stuck his head inside the office. "You two ready to head to Father Vitale's?"

"I'm not going," Alessio said, at the same time I answered, "We were just on our way."

Theo's eyes shifted between the two of us. "Okay, well, we're heading out in five."

I nodded, offering him a tight smile, and he immediately understood to give us space. I was close to a breakthrough, I could feel it. But if I had to get a couple of the others to help me drag Alessio's ass to church, I would.

“Look, Theo and King have been through a lot the past month, me and you also. I think it would be a good show of faith if you could find it in yourself to come with us tonight. Brothers, blood, family. We need this.”

Yeah, so what? I never said I’d play fair.

“Faith requires belief.” Alessio shoved his hands into his pockets and looked toward his computers before muttering, “I don’t believe in anything anymore.”

Fuck. This was bad. I’d never seen Alessio like this, but I just knew if I could get him in front of Father Vitale—

“Come on,” I said, and stepped to the side of the doorway. “We can do this the easy way or the hard way.”

Alessio peered at me through the dark strands of his hair. “You’re not going to drop this, are you?”

“I mean, you either come with us or I bring him here to you.”

His eyes widened. “You wouldn’t.”

Apparently the idea of the reverend in his space was more of a threat than our dragging him to the man kicking and screaming.

“Your choice.”

He let out a muttered curse and stormed over to where I stood.

“I hate you right now.”

I shrugged. “I’m okay with that.”

If his hating me got him out of his lair and in front of the reverend for even a few minutes, at least I’d feel as though I’d helped him in some way toward a path of forgiveness.

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THEO

"NEXT TIME, YOU'RE going with me," I told Shep as I unpacked my suitcase so I could repack it to go to his place. "Tell your job that's a royal decree. *Must attend all personal engagements with Prince Rinaldi*."

Shep smirked as he lay back on his hands on my bed, watching me toss my dirty clothes into a hamper. "Tell my job? I'm the owner."

"Well, as an owner you're a hardass."

"Damn right I am." His legs shot out to trap me between them and hold me there. "Did you miss me or something?"

I narrowed my eyes at him. "Did I miss having you as a buffer to hold me back from saying shitty things to my brother on my quick trip to Monaco? Gee, no, why would you think that?"

"You didn't."

"Say shitty things?" I smoothed my hands over Shep's bare shoulders before threading my fingers behind his neck. "Actually, I was on my best behavior, if you can imagine that."

"I can't."

"Then you should've been there."

Shep groaned and dropped his legs to let me go refill my toiletry bag. I'd been living out of suitcases for weeks now—not my favorite thing in the world—but his place was a better fit for us. The overly stuffy royal residence my family kept off Billionaire's Row in Midtown Manhattan was

a gorgeous place, even overlooking Central Park, but it didn't feel like home. Not the way Shep's place did.

"I wish I could've been," he said, reaching for his shirt off the ground to put it back on.

I might've ripped his clothes off the second he arrived, but that didn't mean he could put them on again.

"Hey, hey, hey, what do you think you're doing?" I said, whirling back around. "No clothes allowed at the Rinaldi residence."

Shep looked at me defiantly, a mischievous tip to his lips, and pulled the shirt over his head. "What are you gonna do about it?"

Oh, he was pushing all my buttons. I immediately dropped my bottle of cologne on the mattress and straddled him where he sat, now wearing entirely too much with his boxer briefs pulled on too.

"This is just rude. Taking away my eye candy." I pouted, nipping at his lower lip before sucking it into my mouth. Shep slid his hands up my back, kneading my muscles in a way that felt so damn good I practically sank into him again.

"You forgive me?" he murmured against my mouth between kisses.

"For what?" I lost all train of thought when he touched me, every problem disappearing, any issue dissolving into nothing. There was only Shep, and spending three days apart had only reaffirmed the fact that I couldn't be without him. It wasn't even just a want at this point—it was a *need*. I needed Shep like I needed air to breathe, and that realization was both scary and exhilarating.

He chuckled against my lips before capturing them again, holding me tight to him.

Now *this* was right. How had Shep been in front of me for all these years and I'd never seen it? Never even allowed myself to think it. He'd been King's second-in-command, his ex-partner, a man too in control and stoic to possibly be my type.

That was a laugh. Shep wasn't just my type—he was the one for me. I knew it in my bones as an absolute fact, one that was as unwavering as the man himself.

I held his face between my hands and drew back to look at him. Those light blue eyes were hypnotizing as they opened to meet mine, his lips flushed and swollen.

He was so fucking handsome it hurt.

“I love you,” I said, brushing my thumb over his lips. “And yeah, I missed you. I hate sleeping without you.”

His arms tightened around me. “Why do you think I’ve got circles under my eyes? I kept waking up when I didn’t feel you beside me.”

I couldn’t even tease him about the dark circles, because I got it. It felt like half of me was missing and I’d only been gone for three days.

Seventy-four and a half hours, to be precise.

Not that I was counting down or anything.

“All I know is that starting from today, if you travel, I travel, and vice versa.”

“Really?” Shep arched a brow. “Is this something we’re going to put into writing?”

“It can be.” I grinned and scooted off his lap, looking around for my laptop, then realized I’d left it out on the coffee table. Since I wasn’t about to leave him sitting on my bed all gorgeous and half dressed, willing to agree to my outlandish demands, I rifled through the front of my carry-on and found a napkin from my private plane with the Monaco royal emblem embossed on it.

Parfait.

I snagged a pen from the same pocket and wrote across the top:

Non-negotiables of Theo & Shep
No traveling without the other (if longer than one night)
No clothes allowed at the Rinaldi residence

“What is that?” Shep asked, moving up off the bed, but I quickly brought the napkin to my chest.

“I’ll show you in a minute. I’m not done yet.”

Shep’s eyes narrowed as he quickly reached for it, but I managed to dodge him, laughing when he growled.

“Theo…”

“What? I’m just writing down a few things I think we need to get cleared up going forward in this relationship.”

No life-or-death secrets
One food fight a month to blow off steam
(food of choice to alternate)

"And I don't get to see this…list you're writing?"

"Oh, you will, when you sign it."

Shep snorted. "I'm signing it?"

"*Oui*, how else will it be binding?"

Shep started across the room then, a twinkle of fierce determination in his eyes, and I knew there was no way I'd dodge him this time. He wanted to see what was on the napkin, and if there was one thing that had always been true about Shep, it was if he wanted something, he *always* got it.

"Give me the napkin, Theo."

"I'm still adding to it."

He was gaining on me now, so I moved up onto the bed, but that didn't slow him down. Shep grabbed me around the backs of my knees and tumbled me down onto my back.

A whoosh of air left me on a rush, before I started laughing as I attempted to finish my final demand.

"Hand it over," Shep said as he straddled my waist, pinning me in place.

"Sheesh." I pouted as I held the pen and paper out. "So impatient."

"If you're writing up some crazy list you want me to abide by, then you bet your sweet ass I'm going to be impatient about it."

I let out a sigh and rolled my eyes as he looked down at the napkin. While he read through my "crazy list," I rubbed my hands up his thighs.

"Theo—"

"Read it out loud," I interrupted, as his beautiful eyes found mine. "I want to make sure I got everything."

"Non-negotiables of Theo and Shep. No traveling without the other (if longer than one night). No clothes allowed at the Rinaldi residence. No life-or-death secrets. One food fight a month to blow off steam (food of choice to alternate)." Shep paused then and licked over his lower lip, and I swallowed, knowing the last one was barely legible. "Never stop loving the other."

As his eyes found mine, my heart beat so loudly I was surprised he couldn’t hear it, and the love that was evident in every handsome line of his face made me melt under his stare.

“Where’s the pen?”

“Huh?”

“You want me to sign this, right? Make it legally binding?”

I blinked up at him, my pulse hammering as the craziest, most insane, reckless idea popped into my head. Then I sat up and took the napkin from him, tossing it aside.

“I have a better idea,” I said, and took his face between my hands, brushing a kiss over his lips. “Marry me instead.”

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SHEP

"WE'RE FUCKING INSANE, you know that?" Theo laughed as we stepped off the private jet and onto the tarmac at Henderson Executive Airport a handful of hours after he'd asked me the biggest, most life-changing question anyone ever had.

I still couldn't quite believe the way the words had so easily rolled off his tongue, or the way I'd known instantly what my answer was, without even thinking it through. I didn't need to. The moment I chose Theo, I'd known it wasn't an off-the-cuff choice I'd question later. When I chose him, it was permanent, in my heart and in my mind, and my answer had come as easily as the smooth flight from New York to Nevada.

Yes. A million times, yes.

The little we'd brought was shoved into the carry-on bag I had over my shoulder, because what else did we need besides each other?

God, if our brothers were here, they'd be gagging. I was turning into one of those sappy romantics, wasn't I? Or maybe I'd always been that way, and finding my person had brought that out in me.

I looked at Theo, his dark hair blowing over his forehead, his eyes shining, and reached over to thread my fingers through his. That gorgeous smile was contagious, mirroring my own.

"Insane or just finally making good decisions?" I said to answer his question.

"Both. Definitely."

As our chauffeured car pulled to a stop in front of us, I tugged Theo into my side and looked out at our destination. It was a crystal-clear night and the bright lights of Vegas were more of a glow in the distance, a promise of our future ahead.

"I like that."

"That we're insane?"

Theo grinned as he slid into the back seat and I followed. "That I make you a little crazy."

I chuckled and pulled him to my side. "You definitely do that."

He let out a sigh and settled into the crook of my arm, then looked up at me, all the love he was feeling shining out of his gorgeous eyes.

"God, I love you," I said.

"Snuck up on you, didn't it?"

"Sure did." I brushed my thumb over his cheek. "Best surprise ever."

Theo slipped his hand over my heart and purred. "Mine."

I definitely was. My heart, my mind, and my soul—it all belonged to him now. That had never been more apparent than when he'd whispered those three magic words, *"Marry me instead."*

I stared down into Theo's handsome face as he lay beneath me, more vulnerable than ever, his heart in his eyes as he waited for my response, and everything I'd ever thought about love, soul mates, and happily-ever-afters appeared right before me.

It was Theo. It always had been. My forever had been right in front of me all this time—I'd just been looking in the wrong direction.

"Yes," I said without hesitation, without an ounce of doubt. I wasn't one to speak before thinking things through, without weighing all the pros and cons and possible obstacles.

But this? Easiest yes *I'd ever given.*

Theo gave me a heart-stopping smile, though truthfully, my heart had stopped when he asked me to marry him. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

He bolted up, reached for the back of my neck, and stole my lips in a kiss that sent sparks shooting through my entire body. It was almost like I'd taken him by surprise, like he hadn't expected me to take him seriously.

His mouth left mine, only for him to kiss his way down my jaw to my ear. "You ready now?"

I choked out a laugh. “Now?”

“Why not? We could hop a flight to Vegas…”

A thrill shot through me, but he was just joking. Right? “Be serious,” I said.

“I am *serious.” He pulled back to look me in the eyes, and there wasn’t a trace of humor in them. “Marry me, Shep. Marry me tonight.”*

WE HEADED STRAIGHT from the airport to the Clark County Marriage License Bureau, which, not surprisingly, had a line of couples when we got there close to midnight. Where else could you go to get married at any time of night or day?

“Identification, please,” the woman at the desk said when we made our way to the front of the line.

Theo handed over his passport and my driver’s license, and the woman frowned as she looked them over.

“Do you need my passport instead?” I asked, reaching into my back pocket where I’d brought it just in case, but she shook her head.

“No. You just have the same name as—” Her words cut off when she glanced back up and got a good look at my face. Then she did a double take at the ID and me again, and her mouth parted.

“We’d appreciate your keeping this quiet,” Theo said, slipping the woman a few large bills across the counter.

But that drew her attention to him, and her jaw practically unhinged.

“Oh my God,” she said, grinning widely and trying to keep her voice at a whisper, but her enthusiasm made it hard. She pushed her chair back suddenly and got to her feet, and then she did a kind of cross between a bow and a curtsy to Theo, like she didn’t know which one she was supposed to do in the presence of a royal.

“Thank you, but there’s no need for that,” he said, reaching for her hand and clasping it with both of his while I glanced over my shoulder to make sure the couples behind us were so focused on each other that they weren’t watching the spectacle.

No such luck. The two directly behind us were watching with wide eyes, and I knew they were seconds away from busting our their phones to record what was happening.

So much for keeping things quiet. But even that wasn’t going to ruin our night. Everyone was going to find out anyway, and I’d found somewhere a

little more private for our actual vows.

God. *Vows.* We were really going to do this.

“I just saw you on the news this week, and I had no idea you were a couple,” the woman said as she settled back into her chair and pulled up the online forms we’d filled out on the plane. “Now you’re getting *married*? I can’t believe it.”

“Well, if I don’t tie Shep to me now, someone might try to steal him away,” Theo said, his charming smile on display as he wrapped an arm around my waist and pulled me in close.

A soft squeal escaped her, and I could hear the surprised rumbling of voices behind us.

“I’ll get this ready for you now,” she said. “I just need to confirm a few details. Your full name is Prince Theodore Rinaldi?”

“Just Theodore Rinaldi,” he said before shooting her a wink. “Though I’ll also go by Shep’s Sexy-As-Fuck Future Husband if you want to put that down.”

“That might be a little long,” I pointed out.

“Only for you. Shepard O’Neil Winchester the third, Theo’s Sexy-As-Fuck Future Husband, *is* kind of a mouthful.”

“Okay, let’s debate that later. For now we’ll stick with our given names, thank you.”

“Of course. Let me get that printed out for you.” The last thing we needed was a crowd gathering. She grinned at the two of us, my tone clearly prompting her to hurry things along.

Seconds later, with the marriage license in hand, Theo and I were exiting the bureau with one thing on our minds—securing our happily-ever-after.

THE LIGHTS OF Vegas twinkled outside the car window as we headed toward our next destination, my contribution to tonight’s whirlwind of activities. I still wasn’t fully convinced we hadn’t both been abducted by aliens to be doing something so insane. But as I looked at the man sitting beside me, the reality of the moment settled, comforting a part of my soul that had always been a little restless and deeply alone.

Theo made my world a happier place. A far more chaotic one, but a happy kind of chaos. The type that kept me on my toes, wondering what he would do next to make me fall even more in love with him.

He was impulsive and passionate, and tonight I would make him mine. Something I couldn't wait to show to the rest of the world when we walked out of—

"The Chapel of Flowers?" Theo said as the car drew to a stop outside of a white chapel lit up with a warm glow.

"Hey now, this was all very last minute. You're the one who suggested Vegas."

Theo chuckled and reached for my hand, bringing it to his lips. "I'm not complaining. I'm actually pleasantly surprised Elvis hasn't come out to greet us."

A wide smile crossed my lips, and Theo's eyes widened.

"He's not going to, is he?"

"No, no." I laughed and pushed open the door to climb out. "No one is going to be singing 'Love Me Tender' tonight."

"Are you sure? Because your smile looks…devious."

"That's rich coming from you. But yes, I'm sure," I said, and held my hand out to him. "Trust me."

Theo slipped his fingers into mine and climbed out. I pulled him into my arms and pressed a hard kiss to his lips.

"I love you."

"Then prove it. Marry me," he said.

"Right here. Right now." I tugged him toward the front door. Just as I was about to pull it open, a middle-aged man in a tuxedo stepped out, his bright smile aimed in our direction.

"Good evening, gentlemen. I trust your flight went smoothly, as well as your trip to the licensing bureau?"

"It did, yes. Thank you. You must be Wilson?"

"That's right, and you are Mr. O'Neil Winchester?"

Theo chuckled, more than aware that everyone in the country knew who I was, especially if they were expecting me to arrive.

"That's right. I hope we aren't putting you out too—"

"Not at all," Wilson interrupted. But the pure happiness radiating off the man told me that he had no problem with shutting his venue down for us tonight. My hefty offer to book out the place would more than make up for any lost revenue he might incur.

"We appreciate that. The pictures I saw online of the Glass Gardens chapel were beautiful." Especially since this was a last minute, spur-of-the-

moment, where-the-hell-can-we-even-do-this kind of venue.

“Oh, just wait until you see it in person. Are you ready to head straight inside, or would you like a private room to maybe reflect—”

“We’re ready,” Theo said, squeezing my hand, and I nodded.

“Perfect. We’ve got a selection of songs for you to choose from for the ceremony if you’d like?”

I arched a brow at Theo, who shrugged.

“I’m good with anything,” he said.

A song popped into my mind then, and I had no idea why, but suddenly it felt like the right choice. *If* it was available.

Then again, I’d learned over the years that anything was possible for the right price.

“I’ll take care of this one,” I said, lifting Theo’s chin and kissing those sweet lips. “Why don’t you go wait for me?”

“You better not be running out on me. ’Cause I’d find you…”

I grinned and stole another kiss. “You’ll never have to.”

There was nothing I wanted more than to wake up to his handsome face day after day, year after year, and if being apart for a few days had told me anything, it was that. He’d never have to search for me, because I’d always be there. That was a promise I could make, and so easily I wondered how it had taken me so long to see it.

I followed Wilson to choose the music, speaking with him quietly so Theo wouldn’t overhear, and I had to respect the fact that the guy didn’t react when I told him what I wanted.

Maybe he’d just seen it all at this point, and my request wasn’t *too* over the top. After all, we weren’t inviting dead celebrity impersonators to officiate.

After finding what I wanted, Wilson led me to a door to wait before directing Theo around the corner out of view.

“I’ll just get the cameras set up and we’ll begin,” he said.

Those words, and the fact that I could no longer see Theo, had a ripple of emotion surging through me.

Holy shit. I was about to get *married*. In a few minutes, Theo would be my husband, and it was so wild to think about that my brain could barely comprehend it. But it felt so right—the peace and contentment I felt, the pride in knowing who I would have walking beside me as my life partner.

The thrill of finally finding my person. The man I knew would stand beside me, choose me over anything that came our way, the same way I would.

This was what it felt like to find the one.

And I was more than ready to marry Theodore Rinaldi.

The door in front of me opened, an older woman smiling at me as she gestured me inside. The soft sounds of a violin echoed through the small chapel as I walked inside, buttoning my suit jacket and heading to the front of the altar, where Wilson waited. It felt like our own private sanctuary, the light in the room coming from the stunning overhead chandelier that had been set to low and the many candles and tealights that were interspersed between elegant bouquets of red roses.

It was perfect. Passionate and bold, romantic and incredibly intimate. My stomach flipped as I turned to face the aisle and realized Theo would be walking down it any second. The anticipation was almost too much to take, my heartbeat kicking up so fast I hoped I wouldn't pass out before he walked in.

Then he was there, filling the doorway, illuminated by the light behind him like the miracle he was—and holy hell, how did anyone do this with others watching?

It was hard enough to keep my composure as it was. But damn, Theo was the most handsome man I'd ever seen, and in minutes he was going to be mine.

I was so caught up in my future husband that when the music started over the speakers and the familiar rhythm played overhead, I'd forgotten the out-of-the-box decision I'd made on our wedding song.

I could only hope the slow smile that curved Theo's lips meant he approved of my choice. He shook his head, slipped a hand into one of his pockets, and began to stroll down the aisle with all the charm and swagger I knew him to possess to "I'm Gonna Be (500 Miles)" by The Proclaimers. Because really, who wouldn't walk five hundred—or five thousand—miles to fall down at this man's feet?

I grinned wider with every step he took, and when he finally reached me I took his hands in mine and drew him in close to me.

As the music faded out and Wilson moved up beside us, Theo rubbed his thumb over my fingers and winked at me.

"Shep and Theo, we are here tonight at your request because you have decided to join your lives together in holy matrimony."

I raised my brows at Theo, who didn't even flinch as he stared into my eyes. There wasn't one ounce of hesitation there. He was as certain of me as I was of him. And nothing had felt more right in my life.

"Have you prepared anything you'd like to say?" Wilson asked, and honestly, it was a shock either of us heard him. It was as though we were in a bubble. Me and him. Him and me forever. Everyone else could leave us alone and we'd be happy right here.

"Shepard?"

Oh right, I needed to say something if I wanted this to end the way my fantasy did.

"We prepared something," I said, my voice a little deeper than usual as it tried to get past my heart that was suddenly in my throat. "Theo, we've known each other a long time now. Through our families, then as… colleagues," I remembered to say for the sake of outside ears. "We've been friends for years. But over the last few months you stepped out of that box and into a brand-new space in my life, an empty space, one that was waiting for someone to fill it—my heart."

Theo's eyes grew a little glassy as he blinked at me.

"I had no idea that the person that would finally complete me was standing right next to me all along. He just wasn't in focus yet." I reached up to run my fingers down his stubbled cheek. "But you are now. You are all that's bright, all that's light in my life. You step into a room and every other person disappears out of it. I always thought I knew what love was. But I had no idea until I fell in love with you."

"Damn." He reached up to wipe at the corner of his eye, shaking his head slightly as he met my stare. "That right there is why I'm in love with you. I think I have the words to say, just like I thought I had my life planned out, but then you come along and I can't remember what I thought was so great. Because life with you is already so much better than I imagined, and considering what we've been through lately, that tells me all I need to know about our future."

He squeezed my fingers and smiled as a lone tear escaped down his cheek.

"I love that I can be myself with you. That you accept me, all of me, without question. That you know me well enough to know I'd love that fucking song you just played."

I grinned. “It’s because I—” I stopped myself to add what I’d been practicing in my head. “*Je t’aime*.”

I’d probably butchered that, but it made Theo’s smile bigger, and that was all that mattered.

“You better,” he said, leaning in to kiss my lips before whispering, “Because I’m gonna be the man that grows old with you.”

“Damn right you are.”

He kissed me again, and to Wilson’s credit, he didn’t interrupt our moment to keep going until we were ready.

“Do you, Shepard, take Theodore as your husband and lifelong companion, for as long as you both shall live?”

Theo’s brow quirked ever so slightly, a mischievous spark still peeking out of those gorgeous blue eyes.

“I absolutely do,” I said.

“And do you, Theodore, take Shepard as your husband and lifelong companion, for as long as you both shall live?”

“*Oui*. I do.”

“Congratulations to you both. I now pronounce you husbands—” Wilson said, and before he could grant us whatever permission to kiss that was usually said, I’d grabbed hold of Theo and had his mouth under mine to seal our vows.

We’d done it. We’d really gone through with it, and as Theo pulled back and a cheeky smile lit up his handsome face, I realized that holy shit, I’d just married the Prince of Monaco—in Vegas.

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THEO

THE ELEVATOR DOORS opened onto the top floor of the Wynn, and we spilled out like we'd been shot from a cannon.

A very drunk, very happily married cannon.

Shep's tie dangled around his neck, his shirt half untucked, and he was laughing so hard as he fumbled for the room key that I was surprised no one stuck their head out to tell us to shut the hell up.

Not that I was much better. I couldn't even walk in a straight line, shoulder-checking the wall as I followed after him.

"Mr. President's son," I drawled. Every part of me felt warm and loose —except my cock. No amount of alcohol could dull the arousal Shep evoked in me. If anything, it made me even hotter. "How does it feel to be a married man?"

He spun around suddenly, completely off balance, and clasped his hands behind my neck, drawing me in closer, whiskey hot on his breath. "I think you mean Mr.—" A frown creased his forehead, an adorably confused expression on his face. "Fuck, what's my name now?"

Even in a sober state, his name was like five hundred pages long, but with all the drinks we had, it took an extra amount of brainpower to fumble through.

"Shepard Winches— Wait, no. O'Neil. The third." I grabbed his ass and yanked him toward me, sending us stumbling back into the wall. "*Putain*. Where does the Rinaldi go?"

He waggled his brows, a very un-Shep-like thing to do. “I think you know where,” he said suggestively.

My mouth fell open, and I crushed his hips against mine, rubbing my cock against his through too many damn layers of clothes. “Now that’s why I married you. Filthy fucker.”

A slow smile curved Shep’s mouth and he leaned in, taking my lower lip between his teeth. “How about this…Shep…Rinaldi.”

Through my liquified haze I didn’t grasp what he was telling me at first, because that seemed to make sense to me, but then I realized that was my last name, not his name—or he wanted it to be his name or—

“Don’t tease me,” I said, pushing against his chest, but he only gripped me tighter.

“You don’t like it?”

“I think I like it *too* much. But maybe don’t make a decision when you’ve had an entire bottle of whiskey.”

Even though, holy shit, the fact that he’d even said he might want to take my name in the first place had every part of me vibrating. So much so I needed to get him out of this hallway before a photo of our drunk asses mauling each other became the next front-page article.

I slapped his ass and pushed off the wall, sending him stumbling back and then laughing as he caught himself just in time. He patted down his pants, searching for something, and then reached into his pocket to pull out the key card.

“Found it,” he said, holding it up victoriously—

—only to immediately drop it.

“Oh fuck me.” He bent down to pick it up, muttering more curses and giving me an eyeful of that sweet ass.

“I will if you can manage to get the door open. *Husband*.” I had to keep saying it, otherwise I’d never believe we’d actually gone through with it. We’d really gone to a chapel and promised ourselves to each other *for life*. It had happened, there was video proof—but more than that, every second was seared into my memory forever.

Shep was my husband.

My husband who looked precariously close to losing the fight with gravity as he grasped at the card on the floor.

“You’re tipping over there,” I said, not doing much better as I started toward him like I could help him. We’d probably just end up rolling around

on the Wynn's exquisite carpeting and never get back up.

"Got it." Shep straightened…ish, and made his way to the door. The first pass of the key card didn't work and he cursed. "I'm never drinking again."

"You're adorable when you lie."

He glared at me just as the door swung open, sending him staggering inside, with me following close on his heels.

"*Putain*, I should've carried you over the threshold," I said as the door slammed shut behind us. "Isn't that what you do on your wedding night?"

As the lights slowly warmed in the luxury suite, golden-hued and utterly romantic, Shep turned to face me, looking so damn sexy with his tie undone and dangling from his shoulders.

"I can think of better things we can do," he said. Heat and desire swirled in his eyes, drawing me in like a magnet.

I'd long since lost my jacket somewhere, my white collared shirt unbuttoned halfway down my chest, my sleeves rolled up. I had to be a hot mess, but Shep was looking at me like he thought I was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen.

And God knew it was an absolute fact that no one turned me on the way my man did.

My *husband*.

I reached for the ends of his tie and pulled him to me, then slid my tongue along his lower lip.

"Open for me, Mr.…Rinaldi." Damn, I really fucking loved the way that sounded—and so did Shep, judging by the low groan that rumbled through him.

As his mouth opened and I slipped inside, I drew the tie from around his neck and threw it to the ground. Then I smoothed my hands up under his jacket and pushed it off his broad shoulders so it landed with the discarded strip of material.

"I want you naked," I whispered, as his muscles flexed under my palms and I started to flick the buttons free.

As the material parted, I glided my hands across the warm, delicious skin that came into view until his shirt was hanging off his arms, then I lowered my head and pressed my lips to his Adam's apple.

"So fucking gorgeous," I muttered, as Shep's head fell back and I trailed my fingers down his chest to the button of his pants. I kissed my way down

his body until I was on my knees in front of him.

God, I wanted him. It was hard to believe there'd ever been a time when I didn't. But with the alcohol buzzing through me, I didn't have the patience for slow and sweet—that would have to come later. What I wanted now was to show my husband just how desirable I found him.

"Shep?" I said from my place at his feet.

That's right, the Prince of Monaco was on his knees.

I didn't kneel for kings—but I would for him.

Shep stared down at me, hot desire swirling in his eyes, as I reached inside his pants and freed his cock. He speared a hand through my hair, his lips curving as he realized what I was about to do, then the sexy fucker gripped the base of his dick and rubbed the head of it against my cheek.

"You want something, husband?"

Fuck yes I did, and I wouldn't be shy in asking for it.

"Let me taste you," I said, and parted my lips.

A smile just this side of wicked curled Shep's lips as he dragged his cock along my lower lip. "Put your tongue out."

Would you look at that? Shep was a fucking deviant when he drank.

I stuck my tongue out, my own cock throbbing in anticipation of what he was about to do next. But nothing prepared me for my intense reaction to his scent hitting my taste buds. My dick jerked, warm, sticky pre-cum making a mess of my pants as Shep slid his cock up the middle of my tongue then said, "Suck me."

Like a man in a trance, I immediately closed my lips around him and began to suck up and down his thick, steel-hard shaft. The velvety smoothness of him on my tongue made me reach for my own cock and squeeze it tight. The last thing I wanted to do was come before I was inside him, but between the taste, sound, and visual of Shep standing above me with his shirt undone and his pants open, I was embarrassingly close to doing just that.

"Oh fuck yes," Shep moaned, flexing his fingers in the longer strands of my hair. "I knew I married you for a reason."

I drew my lips off him and aimed a devilish smirk up at him. "You married me for my cock-sucking skills? I don't remember them in your vows. Maybe you should recite them now."

I flicked my tongue across the pre-cum gathering at the tip of his neglected dick, then settled back on my heels as though I had all the time in

the world.

“You’re serious?” Shep pushed his hips forward, and I gave him a cheeky wink.

“You said it.”

“Hmm.” That rumble did nothing to quell the ache throbbing between my legs. “I did, didn’t I?”

“*Oui*, you did.”

Shep let go of my hair to trail his fingers down my cheek to my chin. When he gripped it between his fingers and angled my face up toward his, that worry I might come before him came back in a rush.

Jesus, he was sexy. With his flushed cheeks and that dangerous glint of arousal hinting at what was to come—namely us—I couldn’t wait to get him under me.

Well, maybe I could wait for whatever he was about to say next.

“Theodore Rinaldi, sexiest, most handsome, *charming* Prince of Monaco—”

“You’re off to a good start,” I said, and bit down on my lower lip.

“I love every single thing about you. From your gorgeous eyes, to your cunning wit, to your trouble-talking mouth that I love to shut up with my… cock.”

I wasn’t going to last. If he kept talking like this and looking like *that*, I was going to come right here in the suite’s living room before I even got my pants off.

“And luckily for me, you suck it like it’s one of your royal duties.”

I snorted, thinking that if that were the case, it might be the one duty I would show up for without complaint. But for now, I wanted more than that. I wanted to take this delicious man into the next room and show him that tonight, the only duties I was interested in performing were my *husbandly* duties.

I moved back up to my knees, gripped his cock, and lowered my head to suck on the tip. After a few well-placed swipes of my tongue, I let him go with a satisfying *pop* and nuzzled my nose into the short hair at the base of his dick.

Shep’s hand moved to the back of my neck as I inhaled his scent, then I began to kiss my way up his treasure trail, abs, and chest. When I was back on my feet, he took my lips in a fierce kiss full of love and possession—something I was feeling myself.

“Come with me.” I laced my fingers with his and led him into our bedroom, needing him naked, needing him under me, needing *him*.

When we reached the end of the bed, Shep was about to turn around when I whispered, “No, stay just like this.”

Shep let his head fall back as I circled his waist and flattened my hands over his stomach. I moved in close, pressing my body up against his, trailing my fingers up and down.

“Theo…” he said, and placed his hands over mine to draw them higher up his body. I kissed his shoulder over the material that still hung from it, then finally took hold of its edges and drew the shirt off him.

I tossed it on the floor and moved right back into position, but my hands weren’t the only thing touching him now—my lips had found a warm spot directly over his shoulder blade. I kissed and sucked my way across the tight, firm skin as my hands found their way back down to where his dick jutted out of his pants.

“My husband has a spectacular cock.”

Shep grunted out a chuckle as my thumb swept over the sticky head. “Was that a requirement?”

“*Oui*, and yours is *most* spectacular.” I stroked my hand down his length, grinning against his back. “To ride, suck, and stroke.”

“Jesus,” he groaned, wrapping his hands over mine as I quickened my pace. He started to thrust in and out of the tight opening we’d created. “*Yes.*.. Theo.”

The more aroused Shep got, the deeper and more sensuous his voice became, seducing me and making my body heat like the expensive whiskey the two of us had polished off tonight.

Needing him now, more than ever, I let go of him and slipped my fingers under the waist of his pants and briefs, then drew them down his legs. He stepped out of them.

“Get up on the bed.” I punctuated the order with a sharp bite to his perfect ass. As Shep did as he was told, I undressed and grabbed the bottle of lube I’d made sure to pack for this impromptu visit.

When I turned back to see him face down on the covers, his arms wrapped around the pillow under his cheek, and his legs slightly spread, my feet faltered.

Putain. He was the picture of male beauty. The light dusting of hair on his legs and thighs led my eyes up to the plump, round ass I couldn’t wait to

get inside of. His back muscles flexed with anticipation of what I was going to do next, and I couldn't wait to lie over the top of him and make him mine.

I climbed up onto the bed and in between his thighs, and the second my fingers touched one of his cheeks, Shep canted his ass up in my direction.

"Damn, but your ass is something else," I said, gripping his waist and pulling him fully up to his knees.

A muffled chuckle met my ears as I uncapped the lube and poured some into my hand. Then I reached for my cock, slicked it up, and used what was left to trail slippery fingers along Shep's crack. He moaned loudly as he pushed back and I teased his eager entrance.

"Greedy tonight?"

"Greedy, horny, needy."

"Me too, husband," I said, pushing a finger inside him. "Me too."

I smoothed a hand down his back as I continued to stretch him in preparation for what would come next. I couldn't remember ever wanting a man as much as I wanted Shep, but every time I was with him, that need intensified.

Impatient to claim what was now *legally* mine, I removed my fingers and moved into position, then teased his hole with the head of my cock.

Shep's thighs trembled as I palmed his ass cheek and spread him wide, then I pushed inside of him with one hard thrust.

It was like sinking inside of heaven. A place I would happily spend eternity in.

Shep was hot and tight, and I fit inside like he was made for me. Something I was truly starting to believe. It was as though we were two pieces to the same puzzle, fitting inside the other one when the other needed it, each complementing the other's body.

A low growl rumbled out of my gorgeous husband as he got used to the intrusion—then he started to move.

A slow, lazy rock of his hips had him sliding along my length before he changed course and pushed back. I grabbed hold of his hips, allowing him to set the languid pace, knowing that once he found and hit the right spot—

"Oh, *fuck* yes."

That was the one.

Shep's arms bunched as he tightened them around the pillow under his head, his body clutching at mine as though the idea of letting it go would be

a fate worse than death. But he had nothing to worry about. I wasn't going anywhere.

The extreme pleasure of being buried inside of him confirmed that.

Fire licked through my veins as I began to move in and out of him, keeping time with his ever-increasing pace, understanding he was feeling the rush of desire as hot and fierce as I was now, as he chased the ultimate pleasure. The one that was right there, within our reach.

My toes curled as I sank inside him again and again, then I reached under him to grip his cock, giving it several rough pulls as I continued to tunnel in and out of him.

"That's right, Mr. *Rinaldi*—"

"Oh God…"

"—I want to feel you come. Want to watch my *husband* fall apart while I'm deep inside him."

Shep groaned, his dick jerking in my hand as his ass clamped like a vise around mine. Then he buried his face in the pillow and roared like a madman as he came all over my hand and sheets.

I couldn't remember ever feeling as possessive as I did right then over someone, over what was *mine*. As Shep collapsed down onto the bed, I followed, bringing my hands up to find his, lace them by his head, and hold him in place.

I flicked my tongue over his lobe as I remained fully lodged inside him, and when he turned his head to meet my lips, I began to roll my hips.

In and out. Up and down. I massaged my dick with his ass until I was rutting against him, getting myself off inside of him, until finally it was too much. That was when all of the feelings I'd felt today finally came to a head, and I exploded inside of him in a hot, sticky rush of emotion.

I curled my fingers around his and drew our arms in close as I snuggled into Shep's back.

"I'm the luckiest prince ever."

Shep's body vibrated under mine as he hummed in pleasure. "Got your happily-ever-after, huh?"

I pressed a kiss to his cheek and closed my eyes, reveling in the warm aftermath of our pleasure. "Sure did, and you know what?"

"What?" he asked, his voice sleepy from the whiskey and sex.

"Turns out it's even better than what's in the books." And it was.

Shepard O'Neil Winchester the third—now Rinaldi—was my husband. It was official.

And didn’t that make me the luckiest prince in the entire fucking world?

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SHEP

"I'M NEVER DRINKING again." Theo's slurred words against my stomach were what finally broke through the heavy sleep that had me feeling like my body was pinned down by some unexplained force.

I cracked one eye open.

Actually, that weight was just Theo, sprawled across me completely naked with the sheets half thrown off the bed.

"Famous last words," I said, shifting slowly up to my elbows. "Holy shit."

"You feel it too, huh?"

"What the hell did we do last night?"

It seemed like it took all his effort for Theo to lift his left hand to show off the white-gold band that adorned his ring finger.

He was in such rough shape that I couldn't help but want to play with him.

"Where'd you get that ring?"

Theo's head shot up so fast he winced. I kept my expression curious, and his eyes narrowed on me. "I swear to God, if you tell me you don't remember last night…"

"Oh, I remember, all right. You poured a bottle of whiskey down my throat."

"Not what I was referring to."

That perfect, round ass of his caught and held my attention under the light seeping through the edges of the curtains, and I licked my lips. "Like I

could fucking forget one of the hottest nights of my life."

Theo growled and moved to straddle me, pinning my arms down. "Try again."

I frowned. "No, it *wasn't* one of the hottest nights of my life?"

"And?" He wrapped his fingers around my left wrist and held it up between us. "Ring any bells?"

"Oh, right. We found matching rings—"

Theo's face flashed with something a lot like panic, and I chuckled, bringing his hand to my lips to kiss his ring.

"Best decision I ever made, marrying you," I said.

His eyes softened, relief settling his shoulders, and then he leaned down to kiss me. "You better say that. You're stuck with me now, Winchester."

"*Rinaldi*," I corrected him, running my fingers through his hair to push the strands back from his face.

"You're serious about that?"

"Like you said, Shepard O'Neil Winchester Rinaldi is a mouthful. But since you *like* a mouthful, it could always be Theodore Rinaldi O'Neil Winchester, or maybe—"

He clamped his hand over my mouth and smiled. "I just want you." He grazed his lips softly over mine before trailing down my jaw. "No matter what you wanna call yourself."

Even through the pounding assaulting my head, I'd never felt so content in my life with my man in my arms, the one I could now call my husband, and a lifetime ahead of us.

And, hopefully, many more crazy, last-minute decisions to come.

"How much do you wanna bet the guys are losing their minds right now?" he said as I wrapped my arms tight around him, wanting to feel him against me, skin to skin.

"On a scale of one to ten, a twenty. *If* Alessio shared our location—"

"Or if Wilson or someone at the chapel made a call. Although he did sign an NDA, so maybe not…"

"Could be one of the couples in line with us."

"*Or,*" Theo said, "we got lucky and no one knows a thing. No one but us."

Now that he was waking up, though, I could see the way he was practically bursting at keeping things quiet, and for once, I couldn't blame

him. There was an overwhelming desire to tell everyone that Theo was mine, and I lifted my head to kiss him hard.

“Why don’t you go check?” I said, grinning when he scrambled off the bed and began the search for his phone.

Shit. There was no telling where it was. I’d lost track of mine at some point, and it didn’t help that we’d put them on silent before walking into the chapel.

I sat up and scanned the wreckage of blankets, pillows, and clothes strewn across the room. Obviously we’d had a good time last night—the delicious ache in my body was also proof of that. Theo tossed things around as he searched for our phones, and I let myself enjoy the view.

“Found ’em,” he said as the pillows he’d thrown out of the way landed on me.

I took one and placed it behind my head. “Did we manage to stay off the radar?”

Theo swiped his thumb across the screen, and when his eyes widened, I knew the answer.

We’d been outed.

“I’ve never actually had a full voicemail box before,” he said, putting his phone on speaker as a familiar voice came over the line.

“Uh, what are you two going to Vegas for?” Alessio’s message started. “There’s nothing on the schedule, and I swear to God if you’re about to do something stupid—”

Theo chuckled and hit the next message, and Amaya’s voice came over the line. “Of course you’re not answering your phone,” she muttered. “I just got a call to confirm you and Shep eloped in Las Vegas tonight. What part about communication being the most important thing slipped by you at our meeting—”

I arched a brow at Theo as he smirked and turned off the message.

“Yes, Theo, how dare you not call your family’s manager to run our private life by her first,” I tsked.

Although, being in positions like ours, that *was* the right thing to do. The smart thing. The way *I’d* always done things.

But like we’d said many times since we’d gotten together: *Fuck it.*

“Where’s your phone?”

“Dunno,” I said with a lazy shrug. “Don’t really care, either.”

“Sure you don’t. Shepard O’Neil Winchester the third is never as relaxed as this man lounging in my bed right now.”

“A, this is not your bed, and B, I’m not sure how many times I need to tell you this, but my name is now Shepard *Rinaldi*.”

Theo snorted. “Which is exactly why I have…one hundred and forty-seven text messages.” He looked around the room, and when his eyes landed on his pants hanging off the side table, he grinned and reached under them for my phone. “Bet you have at least one hundred and fifty.”

“Why would I have more than you?” I said as I took the cell from him, not really caring one way or another.

“Because we’re in *your* country. News would’ve traveled quicker here.”

I rolled my eyes as my phone powered on, and when the screen flashed up, I scoffed.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Theo said, pulling the sheet over his crossed legs. “How many are there?”

They were still populating—that was how many there were.

“Shep?” I held up a finger, and Theo started to laugh uproariously. “Oh my God, and you thought *my* private life needed to be reported on. Is it *still* going?”

Nope. It had just stopped with a grand total of: “One full voicemail box, two hundred and four texts, and an amount of emails that’s making my eye twitch.”

“*Merde*. Apparently this kind of behavior is out of character for you, Mr. Winches—*Rinaldi*. Whereas most *expect* this kind of scandal from me.”

“Oh?” I arched a brow. “Run off and gotten married before, have you?”

“Well, not married…exactly.”

That got my attention. My head snapped up and I focused on Theo’s cheeky grin. “What the hell does that mean?”

He swiped a hand through the air dismissively. “Nothing.”

I grabbed the sheet he’d wrapped around his waist and hauled him toward me, making him chuckle. “What does that *mean*, Theo?”

“It just means that I might’ve run off and *thought* about it. But I didn’t actually *do* it.”

I narrowed my eyes on his twinkling ones. “Who is he?”

“Why? Are you going to track him down and—”

“Castrate him? Yes.”

Theo grinned and shoved me back against the headboard, then pointed to the phone. “Maybe some other time, tough guy. Right now, I think it’s more important you check some of those messages.”

He was right, of course. But the thought of Theo even thinking about marrying anyone but me made me feel suddenly homicidal.

“Does he live near us?”

“Oh my God, Shep.” He fell back onto the bed.

“Did you love him?”

“I was twenty.”

“Not an answer.”

“I was drunk?”

“You were drunk last night.”

He sat up then. “I was one hundred percent sober when I asked you to marry me, got on a plane, then walked down the aisle to make you legally mine for the rest of our lives. So unless you’ve changed your mind—”

I grabbed him and tumbled him to his back on the mattress, then planted my hands on either side of his head.

“I haven’t. I just wanted to make sure that when I message back all two hundred and four people who asked me if I got married last night, I can write back with full conviction that I did.”

Theo looked at the phone under my hand by his head, then back to me, before he arched his body up and rubbed his cock against mine.

“Think we could message them back later?”

“Not unless you want half of them to jump on a private plane and knock on our door. Remember, Alessio can track us, and I’m pretty sure your family could hunt us down too. You *are* royalty.”

Theo let out a sigh as I reluctantly moved off him. I understood that reluctance. The minute we called back or sent out a text, our private bubble would burst. This perfect moment we were in would come to an end and the outside world would intrude—and while I couldn’t wait to tell people, I was also enjoying this time away from everyone.

“Who’s first on your voicemail?” he asked as I sat up. “Let me guess—”

“King,” we said at the exact same time.

I could only imagine what he would have to say about this.

I tapped open the recording and then hit speaker, and King’s deep voice filled the room.

“Shep, hi, I just saw some news on my phone that um, well… I’d just like to know from you if it’s true or not. I’m not trying to be nosy—”

“Sure he’s not.” Theo grinned, but I held my hand up so we could hear the end of the message.

“—but it’s being reported that you and Theo got married. Like I said, I’m not trying to intrude, and if it’s real, I’m very happy for you both. I just… Just call me back or message. If you need Alessio to put out any kind of copy, we could get Cooper to write it up. If this is a mistake— But again, if it’s not, I’m happy for you both. Talk soon.”

As the message ended and I looked at Theo, his grin turned into a full-on smile. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard that man sound so unsure of himself. I think he might’ve even stumbled there for a minute.”

“He’s probably still trying to wrap his head around it.”

“I mean, we did just tell him we were dating—marriage seems like a rather quick progression in his mind, I’m sure.”

“Look at you trying to be understanding of King’s feelings.”

“Oh please, you’ve just caught me whilst still in the fog of wedded bliss.”

“Is *that* what this headache is?”

“You’re hilarious. But I bet you won’t be making jokes when I tell you we’re going to have to do this all over again…televised.”

My smile immediately dropped. “What?”

“You married a prince—my public will demand it.”

It made sense, of course it did, that Theo—who was an actual prince—would have to make some kind of to-do about his nuptials.

But did it really have to be in front of… “*Your* public?”

“*Oui*, they are mine.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. “Could you sound more pompous?”

“Probably. But I am naked. That makes it slightly harder.”

“It definitely does,” I said, and looked down at where my cock had stiffened beneath the sheets, something about Theo acting so *princely* making my dick want to stand up and salute him. “But back to the point. When you say televised, couldn’t we just give them the video from last night?”

Theo moved to his hands and knees and crawled up the bed until he straddled my lap, naked and gorgeous as ever.

“*Non*, that is just for you and me. That was *our* moment.” He looped his arms around my neck and brushed his mouth over mine. “This other one, the circus, that will be for them.”

“That sounds so…”

“Horrible? I know. But it’s not like it will be the first time you’ve been caught staring longingly at me in the Cathedral of Our Lady Immaculate.”

“I wasn’t staring at you; I was *glaring* at you.”

“Potato, po-tah-to. You were still caught by Lucien.”

“You left teeth marks in my hand.”

“And if you’re extra nice to me on our wedding day, I might leave teeth marks somewhere more exciting that day. After all, we’ll have to re-create the *entire* event.”

I grabbed Theo’s hips and pulled him in tight, crushing his mouth with mine. “Is that right?”

“You might even have to sleep with the groom before he goes and stands at the altar.”

“Now that, I can get behind.” I tossed my phone aside and tumbled Theo down onto the mattress, the hundreds of texts waiting for me now the *last* thing on my mind. “Think we should practice?”

“Definitely. The world’s waited this long to hear from us. I think they can wait a little longer.”

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THEO

LESS THAN FORTY-EIGHT hours after our elopement and we were back at Shep's place, where it looked like a bomb had gone off.

My shit was everywhere, boxes half unpacked, garment bags lying over the couches, but Shep's stuff was almost worse. He'd been taking everything out of drawers and closets to make room for me, so now his deluxe penthouse was in a state of disarray I knew had to be making him crazy. He was order and control, and this was the visual representation of our lives colliding at high speed.

I stood in the center of the living room surveying the damage. This wasn't a small place by any means, certainly not by Manhattan standards, but suddenly it felt too small to bear our big lives.

"Shep?" I called out, not sure where he'd disappeared to until he responded. I found him in the main bedroom sitting cross-legged on the floor and looking like he was negotiating with God on how to fit both of our shoe collections in the closet.

"Maybe we just turn the guest room into a closet," he murmured half to himself as he placed another of my shoeboxes on top of the pile.

"Eh, we don't want anyone staying with us anyway."

Shep smirked and pushed the boxes up against the wall, and I noticed a small carton off to the side with photos spilling out of them.

I was allowed to be nosy; that was what he got when he married me. No more secrets or surprises. Besides, I wanted to see all the hot younger

photos of Shep, especially if they showcased any deviant behavior from college.

I grabbed a handful and flipped through them. They didn't seem to be in chronological order, with some of him from his father's presidency, and then others of his first days developing his magazine, *Lincoln*.

Aaand then came the more personal photos: Shep on the beach with a group of friends tossing a football; Shep in a nice suit, maybe early twenties, and posing with an actor I recognized. One of him with his arms wrapped around another guy in a teasing, but obviously close pose, and…

Him and King on the balcony of King's place in the Caribbean, both shirtless and smiling at the camera in the selfie.

"Uh, Shep?" I said, and waited until he looked up to wave the photo. "You've still got a box of pictures of your exes."

He barely gave them a passing glance as he pulled out more boxes from the closet. "Yeah, well, I didn't run off with any of them to get married."

Well, he had me there. "Touché," I said, dropping the pictures back on top of the crate and flopping back on the bed, only to hear the crunch of something beneath my ass. I rolled to the side and pulled out a now-mangled basket and hoped that it wasn't a family heirloom of some kind. "Those shoes are not going to fit," I said. "My clothes? Definitely not going to fit."

As if to make my point, his foot knocked into the pile of stacked shoes and they went tumbling, falling open and landing on Shep.

"Fuck me," he said with a sigh, picking up a boot and throwing it across the room. He leaned back against the wall, his brow creased with annoyance.

He was still the most beautiful man I'd ever seen, even frustrated. *Especially* when frustrated. It made me want to do things to his body that would have him moaning in seconds.

Impossible at the moment when there wasn't an inch of free space to get him flat on his back.

"Babe," I said, kicking a pile at my feet out of the way, "don't take this the wrong way, but we can't live here."

"The mess is temporary. Maybe we can hire someone to organize—"

"It's not just that."

"I thought you didn't want to stay at your place?"

“I don’t.” The royal residence we had here in the city was nice, but too stuffy and not right at all for the two of us. And even though I’d always enjoyed being at Shep’s place... “Maybe we could make a place that’s both of ours. Somewhere you don’t have to move your shit to make room for all of mine and we can just…start all over.”

Shep studied me, a pensive look on his face, and then one side of his mouth quirked up. “Did you just call me ‘babe’?”

“I don’t think I’ve called anyone that in my life.”

“You did. I heard you.”

“I called you babe?”

“Mhmm.” Shep moved onto his knees, resting his arms on my thighs as he sat between them. “Feel free to call me that anytime.”

“Oh, you like a nickname,” I said, running my fingers through his hair. “I think I can come up with something better than that. Maybe something in—”

“*Not* French.”

“—French.”

He groaned, and it only made me smile.

“I’ll give you something good, *babe*, trust me,” I said.

“I do.” He ran his large hands up my thighs possessively and squeezed. “Are you serious about not wanting to stay here? We didn’t really talk about it, I just assumed…”

“I love your place. But it’s *your* place. It might be nice to have *our* place.”

“And somewhere a bit bigger.”

“Somewhere with enough soundproofing that the neighbors don’t call the cops when they hear you scream my name.”

That had Shep slowly smiling. “Somewhere private. A place that’s just ours.” He nodded at me. “I like it.”

“Yeah?” I didn’t know why it surprised me how easily Shep was going along with this. He wasn’t exactly the unreasonable hardass I’d always figured he was. He was my man. My husband. And I had a feeling he’d do anything not just for me, but for us. “Holy shit. Are we going house shopping?”

“Like real adults and everything,” he teased, drawing my face down so he could kiss me. I threaded my fingers tighter in his hair, all the chaos of

our current living situation not quite so exasperating when his lips were on mine.

A new place of our own? Sounded like heaven to me, especially when Shep pulled back and I opened my eyes to the mayhem in the bedroom.

He must've read the look on my face, because he chuckled and took his phone out.

"How about I give my real estate agent Ryan a call and see what he can find for us?" he said.

"Make sure it's big. And expensive. And has at least twenty closets."

He shook his head, but hit a number on his phone and brought it to his ear. "Yes, Your Serene Highness."

"That's Your Serene Husband to you."

"NOT THAT ONE," I said as I slid into the back seat of our car and waited for Shep to join me. We'd just finished looking at a gorgeous place, but the second Ryan had told us the address, my mind had already been made up.

"Bet I can guess why." Shep grinned as he pulled the door shut and signaled our driver to follow after Ryan. "But I think it was smart to at least look at it."

"Sure. It has some of the best security on offer in New York, I get it. But I'd rather risk another kidnapping than live in the same building as James Easton."

"Don't even joke about that."

"Who's joking?"

"It's not like you'd have to take the same elevator and risk running into him. That's what the private car elevators are for."

"I know. But there's something about living in the same building as our boss and your ex that seems a little too…communal for my liking. Even if we wouldn't be on the same floor."

Shep chuckled and reached for my hand, lacing our fingers together. "I agree. But I think it's good we checked it out."

"Me too. It just confirmed I'd really rather be anywhere but on the same block as them."

"Noted. So, let's see where we're headed next." Shep pulled out his phone and looked at the listings Ryan had sent over. "Hudson Yards. Ah, the duplex with four bedrooms, six and a half baths, panoramic views."

"Oh yes, I liked the main bathroom in that one."

“Don’t you mean the shower?” Shep grinned as he scrolled through the images and then held up the one of the enormous shower with marble benches at either end and six showerheads running along the wall. “Planning to invite friends over?”

“*Non.* I don’t like to share.”

“That is the only correct answer.”

“*But* that shower gives us plenty of room to play.”

“That it would.” Shep licked his lips as his eyes trailed down over me, clearly imagining all the ways he’d like to “play” with me.

“If you don’t stop looking at me like that, we might have to tell Ryan to let us check out the place on our own.”

“I’m okay with that.”

I chuckled and reached for his hand, my pulse picking up pace when my fingers brushed over the ring there. It hadn’t even been a week since I’d slipped that on his finger, and now here we were out looking at homes together.

We’d managed to narrow it down to a few different styles and neighborhoods, and after visiting a loft in SoHo, a high rise in Chelsea, and a brownstone on the Upper East Side, among others, we were now heading to the final one on the list, the duplex penthouse in Hudson Yards.

“You know, it’s hard to remember that you used to be such a—”

“Be nice…”

I grinned and brought his hand up to my lips, kissing his knuckles. “I was just going to say, ‘such a control freak.’”

“I wasn’t a control freak.”

I shrugged. “You kind of were.”

“Well, good thing you came along and *loosened* me up.”

“Damn right, because now you’re the kind of man about to tell our realtor to leave us alone to inspect the shower privately.”

Shep shook his head as we pulled up out the front of the building.

“As tempted as I am to do that,” he said, then leaned in and brushed his lips over mine, “I’d much rather buy the place so we can move in and I can inspect *you* in the shower whenever the hell I want.”

“Oh, well, why didn’t you say so, Mr. Rinaldi?”

“Fuck, I love the sound of my new name on your tongue.”

“So do I.”

Shep swallowed as he looked me over, and there was no way he could miss the hard-on straining against the zipper of my pants.

But Jesus, what did he expect? All this talk about playing with me in the shower, looking for a home together, seeing how hot he got whenever I called him by *my* given name, that was now going to be his…

It was a miracle I hadn't come in my pants.

"Get out of the car, Shep."

"I don't want to."

A soft laugh left me. "*Non?*"

"No."

"And what do you want?"

His lips curved in a sinfully decadent smile before he glanced out the window to where Ryan was waiting for us. Then he hit the button for the window, and when it slid down a crack said, "We'll take this one, Ryan."

"Uh—" Ryan started.

"Send us over the paperwork, and we'll get it signed."

"You don't want to see it?"

Shep looked back at where I'd unbuttoned my pants and was palming my cock. Clearly there was something about this place that was getting us both hot and bothered without even setting foot in it.

That seemed like a winner to me. I nodded.

"No need," Shep said, reaching over to cover my hand and squeeze. "We know what we want, and we don't want to wait."

Oh hell yes.

"Okay," Ryan said, a huge smile hitting his lips. "I'll, um, get it over to you this afternoon. Have a good day."

"Oh, we plan to," Shep said as he closed the window, instructed our driver to take the long way back, then proceeded to show me *exactly* what he wanted.

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SHEP

4 Months Later

IF SOMEONE HAD told me on the day of Prince Jean's wedding months ago that I'd be standing in the palace gardens of Monaco in a tux having just gotten married—again—to the most handsome, infuriating prince on the planet, I would've assumed they'd been hit in the head one too many times.

But there I was. With Theo's hand in mine and him smiling at me like he planned to keep me for the next sixty years.

God, he was beautiful. And all mine.

"Well, that wasn't too terrible," he said. "Only five hundred pairs of eyes on us and a few hundred mil at home. No big deal."

I chuckled and brought our joined hands up to my mouth, pressing a kiss across his knuckles. "At least the reception's not televised. I can't imagine you'll be keeping your hands to yourself once the drinks start flowing."

"Who needs alcohol?" Theo tugged me in close and wrapped his arms around my waist, his mouth so tempting as it brushed against mine. "I can touch my husband anytime I want. Who's gonna stop me?"

As his hands crept lower, curving over my ass, I groaned and reached behind me to stop him—reluctantly.

"Oh, come on," he murmured against my lips. "Remember what a good time we had at the last wedding party here?"

How could I forget? Theo had practically forced my hand by getting me into the closet and being such a persistent, provoking ass.

On second thought, that did sound like more fun than having to entertain the masses once we were introduced.

“Anyone ever tell you you’re trouble?”

He grinned and nipped at my lips. “Every day of my life.”

“All right, we’re introducing you two in—” Amaya stopped in her tracks as she rounded one of the immaculate hedges and caught sight of us. “Am I interrupting?”

“Yes,” Theo said. “Go away.”

She rolled her eyes and continued toward us, her ever-present tablet in hand. She scrolled down her checklist and spoke into the small microphone she wore on her lapel. “Bonnie and Clyde located. We can start with the intros.”

“What? Which one of us is Bonnie?” I said, frowning until Theo squeezed my ass.

“It could be worse. We could be”—he paused for dramatic effect—“Twiddle*brats*.”

I busted out a laugh at that, not only because that *would* be worse, but because Twiddlebrat and Twiddlesweet were actually here with King.

Amaya made a few taps on her screen. “I have no problem calling you Twiddle—”

“Bonnie and Clyde is fine,” I said quickly, and though she kept her gaze on her tablet, her mouth quirked.

I heard the announcer begin to instruct everyone to turn their attention toward where we’d be making our entrance into the party, and I let go of Theo only long enough to straighten my tux back out.

“Join me in welcoming our men of the evening, Theodore and Shepard Rinaldi!”

A raucous cheer filled the air, and I took hold of Theo’s hand, smiling at him before we walked through the archway and into our outdoor reception.

It was stunning. String lights were draped over the courtyard, giving the night a romantic feel that was entirely at odds with the formal royal wedding. Here, champagne flowed like a river, guests drifted around the gardens’ stunning flowers and marble fountains, and our band of brothers all stood, some grinning, some smirking at us from one side of the dance floor.

This was like a royal fairytale, one I'd never imagined I would be a part of or even dreamed of wanting. I'd just happened to fall in love with a prince and made him my husband.

Even though *this* fairytale prince was a menace, because he kept brushing his fingers along the inside of my wrist like he wanted to drag me into that closet for a repeat.

"How long are we required to be here?" I said under my breath as I smiled at those greeting us.

"I would've left five minutes ago if you hadn't stopped me."

"Dammit."

"You're in it now," he said, shaking his head as a steady stream of well-wishers surrounded us.

I tried to keep close to him as we shook hands and thanked people for coming, but it wasn't easy. Then again, these events were never for the couple as much as they were for everyone else. Which was another good reason to run off and elope.

"Damn. You two actually look the part of royals today," Lachlan said before giving a low whistle as he, our brothers, and their dates all finally joined us.

Alessio shot us a wink. "Some could even say...*Kings*."

"The wedding was beautiful," Lucien said, his arm around Kai's shoulders. "But this…"

"Resplendent," King said, smiling proudly at the two of us.

Theo straightened his cuffs. "Yes, we do clean up rather nice when we have to—"

"We just don't like to have to," I finished, wondering how long we'd been at this already.

Theo leaned in by my ear and, like he'd read my mind, said, "Only twenty minutes."

God, that was all? It felt like an hour.

"So, newlyweds…" Lachlan waggled his brows, and that look had me bracing myself. "Did you ever get your first dance?"

"Please tell me it wasn't to Elvis giving you a private performance in Vegas." Benoit shuddered.

"You don't get a first dance when you elope," I said, and looked at Theo. "What would we have even chosen?"

“About that…” said Lucien, smiling mischievously along with the rest as they began to back away and the soft sounds of a slow song began.

A hush fell over the crowd, who moved off the dance floor, leaving me and Theo alone and with all eyes on us.

“Enjoy your first dance,” the announcer said like he was in cahoots with our brothers.

The lights above the dance floor began to twinkle, and then I heard it. The first line of the song, something about it so familiar though I’d never heard it before.

Or had I?

“Oh my God,” Theo said, grinning broadly as he turned to face me. It took me a second, but then I realized what song it was.

“I’m Gonna Be (500 Miles),” the one I’d chosen for Theo to walk down the aisle to, only this version was something else entirely. Something slow and beautiful and romantic, sung in a heartfelt way that had the words taking on a new meaning.

My throat tightened as I looked past Theo to our brothers and back to my man, and just like that, everyone around us vanished. There was only my husband, as breathtaking as the day he’d married me, and I took his hand, drawing him in close.

His hand slid around my waist, steady and sure, and we began to move.

“How did they know?” I wondered out loud, curious how they’d figured out our song. Miraculously, our wedding video had stayed private, the chapel owner doing his part in honoring the NDA.

“Um, I might’ve let it slip,” Theo said sheepishly. “But dammit, Benoit has a big mouth.”

“Nah, they did us a favor. This is perfect.” I lowered my head beside his, our cheeks pressed together as I slow-danced with my husband. It didn’t matter that we hadn’t practiced; our bodies were so in sync that the moves came naturally.

It was the same with our lives, the way they’d so easily intertwined. Months ago I was chasing him across countries, furious and terrified in equal measure. We were two idiots circling each other, pretending we weren’t attracted and stupidly obsessed.

Before that, I wasn’t even sure what I wanted out of life. I had a legacy I hadn’t asked for, expectations I hadn’t chosen, and a path that was cloaked in shadows and memories from my past.

Theo must've felt the shift in me, because he pulled back just enough to look into my eyes. "Where'd you go?"

I shook my head. "Just thinking."

"About the closet?" he teased, and then pressed a soft kiss to my lips. "Tell me."

"All of it. Everything we've been through. Everything we've survived. I was just thinking how different my life turned out to be compared to what I expected."

Theo leaned in, brushing his nose against mine. "And how did it turn out? Better?"

"*So* much better. I never could've imagined falling in love with such a perfect, sexy, stubborn royal menace."

He laughed and surprised the hell out of me by spinning me around suddenly, before drawing me back into his arms.

"I knew," he murmured, his forehead meeting mine. "I knew I'd be your menace."

My heart squeezed and I tightened my arms around him, feeling the weight and warmth and rightness of him being mine.

No more hiding. No more stolen moments in closets. No more psychopaths hunting us down…

I kissed him again, slowly, taking my sweet time. Even though there'd been thousands of kisses between us, even though I'd memorized the feel of his lips and tongue, I still couldn't believe how lucky I was that we had years and decades ahead of us for moments like this. Of quiet times waking up together, of sexy smirks and food fights and make-up sex. Of whatever it was we wanted to create together.

"I love you," I said, my throat tight from holding back the emotion flooding me. "*Je t'aime.*"

"*Moi aussi je t'aime.*" He laced our fingers together and brought them down between us, his blue eyes shining up at me. "Ready for forever?"

"With you? Always."

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THANK YOU

Thank you for reading
RUTHLESS (Park Avenue Kings #5)

Shep & Theo were all kinds of fun and swoon to write, and while we're going to miss them, we know we'll get to see them again with the rest of the kings in Alessio's book, which is up next.

UNHOLY is the sixth—and final—book in the *Park Avenue King* series.

So, are you ready to go to church?

Father Vitale will hear your confession now.

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SPECIAL THANKS

There are so many special people in our lives that make this job possible, and this right here is where we get to take a moment and thank them.

Our amazing team through thick and thin: Hang Le, Arran, Shauna & Becca at The Author Agency, and Fifi at The Bookish Pulse for our gorgeous reels. You make everything a little prettier when it comes to our work and we thank you for that!

Ren Saliba, thank you for finding and photographing some of the most interesting and handsome faces out there! Gel with Tempting Illustrations, thank you for the wonderful teasers, and Zaza from our Patreon, thank you for always being there to translate our swoony and sexy French translations.

Thank you, to you, our amazing readers and Menotah and Christina who suggested Lucifer for our guys to watch. Whether you're in our private reader group, The Naughty Umbrella, on our Instagram or Tiktok, or one of our Patrons, we appreciate each and every one of you so much for picking up our books and trusting us with your time. It means so much to us that you'd spend your time falling in love with the worlds we have created.

We have loved every second of this world that our kings inhabit and can't wait to bring you the final story.

Xx Brooke & Ella

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ABOUT BROOKE BLAINE

Brooke Blaine is a USA Today Bestselling Author best known for writing romantic comedy and M/M romance. Her novels lead with humor and heart, but Brooke never shies away from throwing in something extra naughty that will scandalize her conservative Southern family for life (bless their hearts).

She's a choc-o-holic, lives for eighties bands (which means she thinks guyliner is totally underrated), believes it's always wine o'clock, and lives with the coolest cat on the planet—her Ragdoll/Maine Coon mix, Jackson Agador Spartacus.

Brooke's Links
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If you'd like to join Brooke & Ella's Patreon for a look behind the scenes, to read chapters early, to get ARCs first, this is the place right here!

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ABOUT ELLA FRANK

Ella Frank is the *USA Today* Bestselling Author of the *Temptation series*, including Try, Take, and Trust and is the co-author of the fan-favorite *Fallen Angel series.* Her *Prime Time series* has been praised as “highly entertaining!” and “sexy as hell!”

A life-long fan of the romance genre, Ella is best known for her steamy, heartfelt, M/M romances.

If you’d like to join Ella & Brooke’s Patreon for a look behind the scenes, to read chapters early, to get ARCs first, this is the place right here!

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You can also find them in their Facebook Group

The Naughty Umbrella
(Facebook Group)

And if you would like to talk with other readers who love Ella’s character’s from her Chicagoverse, you can find them **HERE** at
Ella Frank’s Temptation Series Facebook Group.

Want to stay up to date with all things Ella?
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